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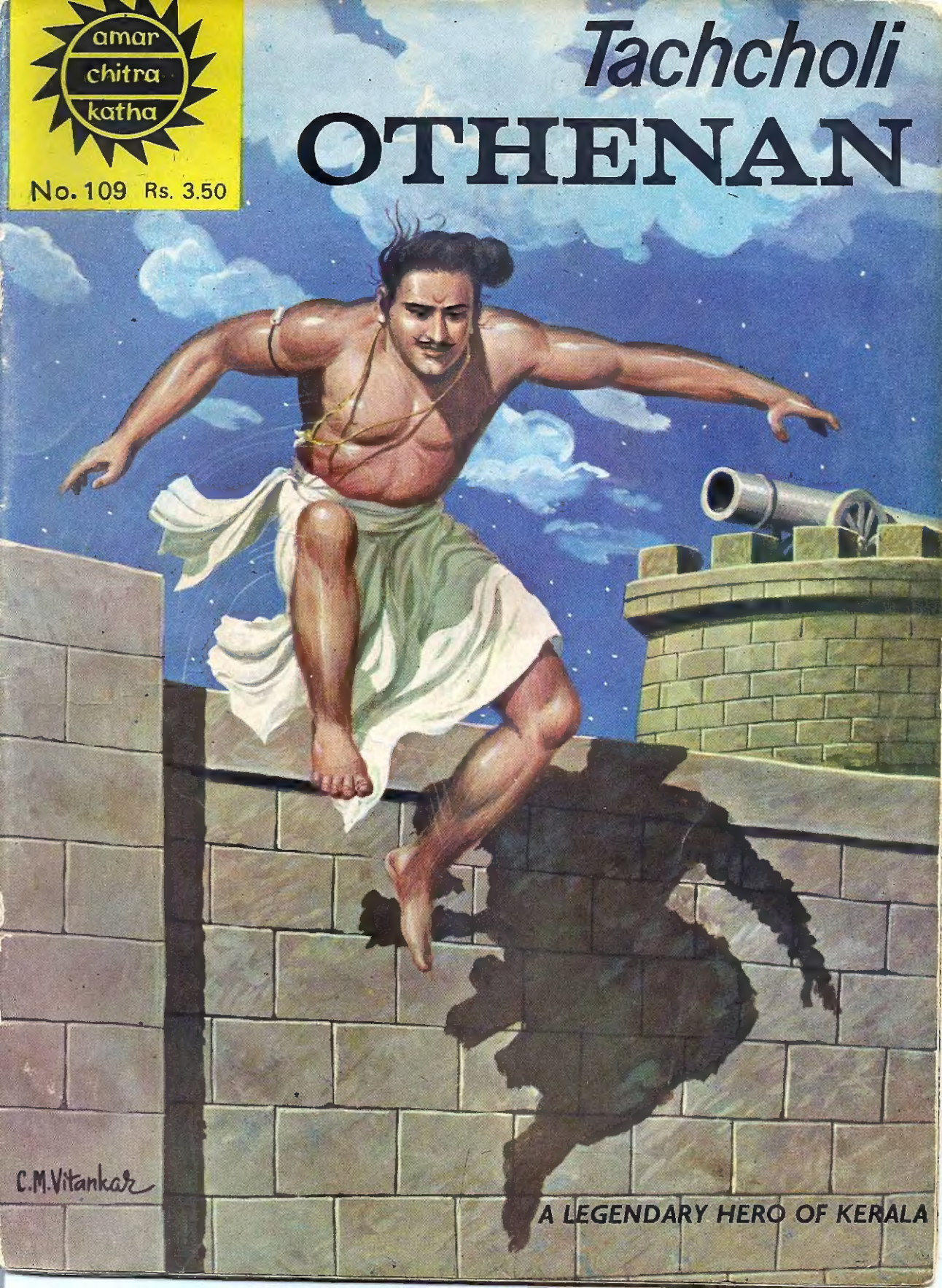
Tachcholi OTHENAN



A LEGENDARY HERO OF KERALA

The story of Othenan is the story of the heroes of Malabar of the 14th and 15th centuries, because as the legends and the ballads would have it, he was the most heroic of them all. The ballads known as the "Vadakkan Pattukal" still form the repertoire of songs of the peasants and labourers of Malabar. They sing of the feudal society, its barons and its villains, its gory codes and its glorious men and women.

Those were the times when "Kalari Payattu" had reached its zenith. Though gunpowder was not unknown, a lithe body and a skilled sword were the chief assets of a soldier and a man was proclaimed by his martial prowess. If he was quick to take offence, he was quick in settling it at the point of his sword. It was this society of feuds and duels that Othenan had stalked like a giant in his time.

Othenan's society was a matrilineal one. It gave women a status equal to men's. The women used it and were heard with respect in all matters – martial as well as marital. Romance feeds on such worlds and the ballads abound in their "braves" and "fairs". Othenan's conquests in this realm are as enviable as in the battlefields. Yet he was no Casanova because never did he violate discipline in any of his actions.

The impetuous Othenan was ever-obedient to his elder brother, Koma Kurup. God-fearing and law-abiding, he fought for just causes as sanctioned by the times and traditions.

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TACHCHOLI OTHENAN

OTHENAN BELONGED TO THE TACHCHOLI FAMILY OF NORTH MALABAR IN KERALA. HIS PARENTS WERE ESTRANGED.

HE LIVED WITH HIS MOTHER AND HIS ELDER BROTHER IN THEIR HUMBLE HOMESTEAD. HIS MOTHER HAD NO BROTHERS* SO TIMES WERE DIFFICULT FOR THE FAMILY.

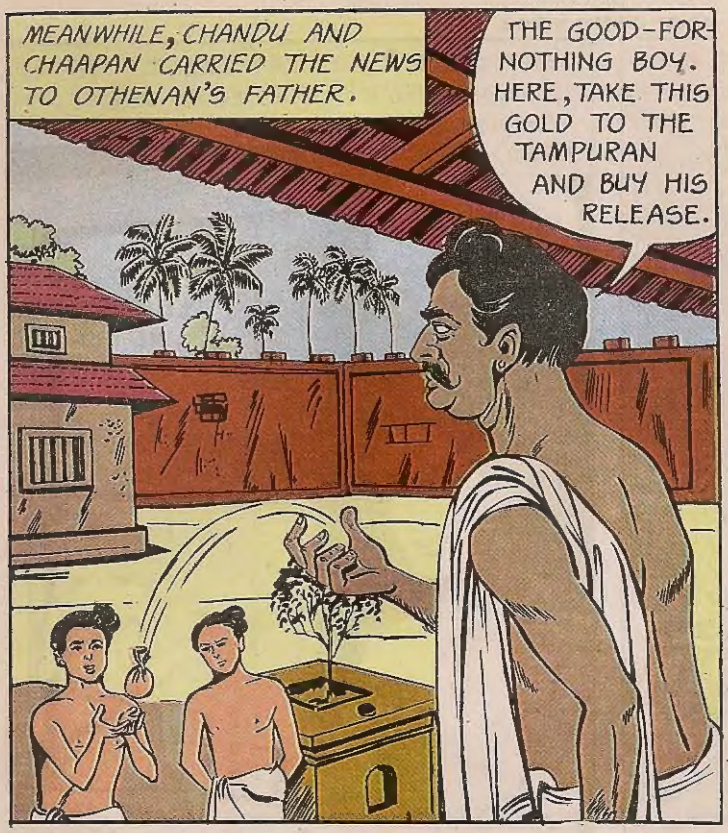
THAT SCOUNDREL, KELAPPAN HAS USURPED MY LANDS, BECAUSE I HAVE NO MATERNAL UNCLE OR BROTHERS TO PROTECT ME. MY GRAIN AND THE CASH FROM THE SALE OF MY SPICES FILL HIS GRANARIES AND HIS COFFERS. IF ONLY MY SONS WERE OLDER.

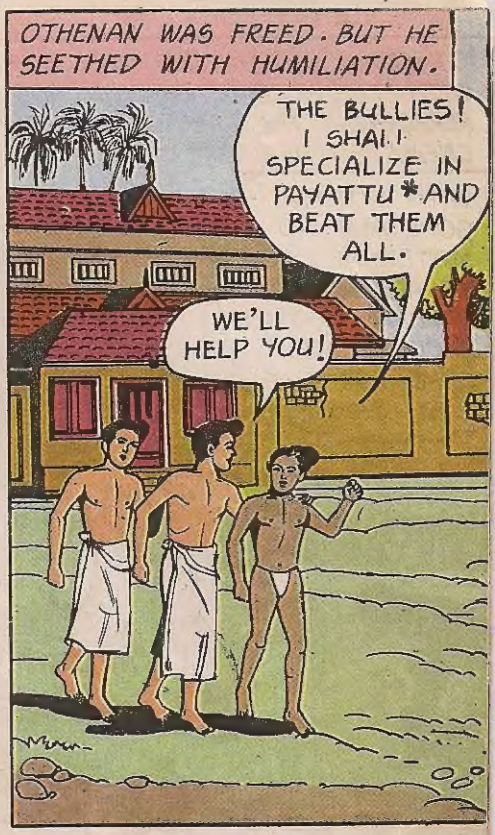
MOTHER, I AM GOING OUT WITH CHAAPAN AND CHANDU.

KEEP AWAY FROM THE TAMPURAN'S ORCHARD.

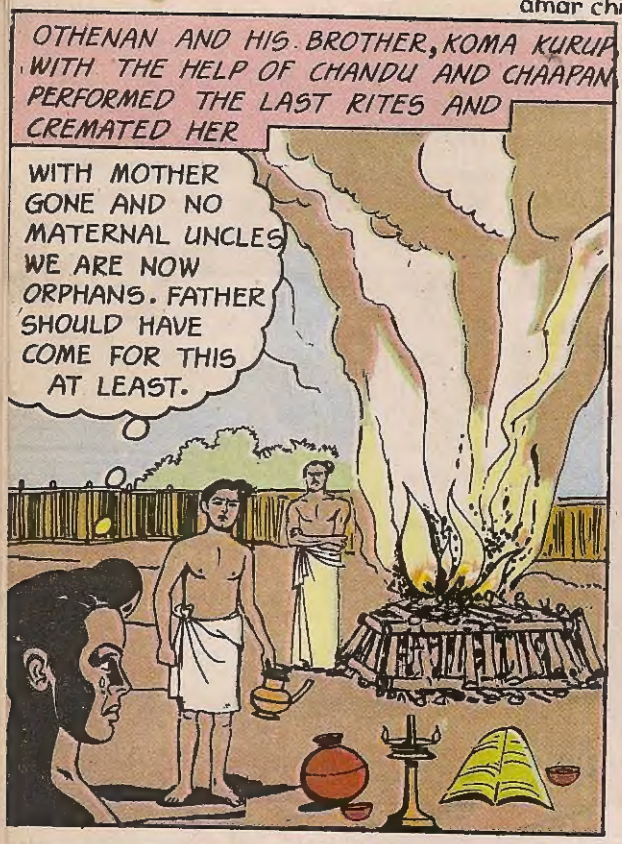
*IN THE MATRILINEAL SOCIETY TO WHICH OTHENAN BELONGED, THE MATERNAL UNCLES AND NOT THE FATHER MAINTAINED THE CHILDREN. **A FEUDAL BARON.

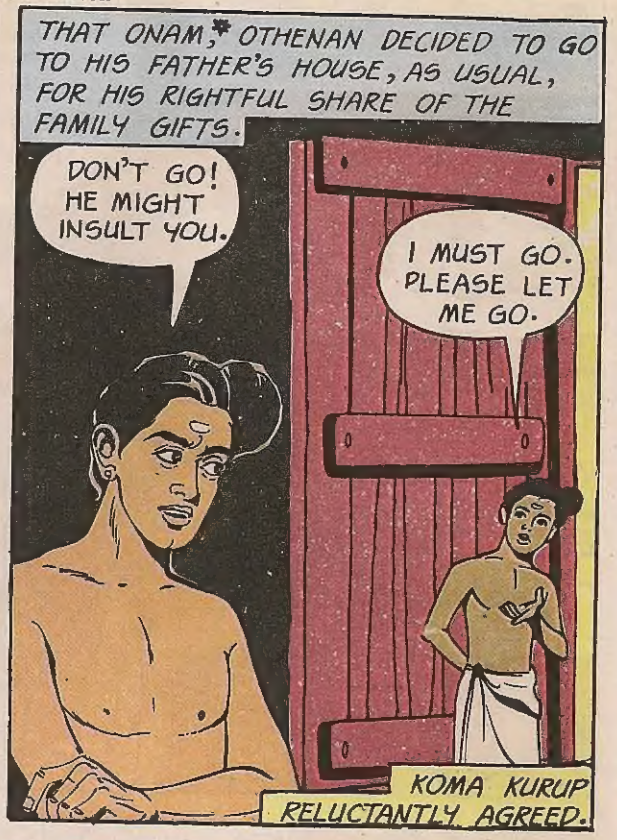
BUT THAT WAS EXACTLY WHERE OTHENAN AND HIS COMPANIONS, CHANDU AND CHAAPAN WENT.
SUDDENLY —
RUN! THE TAMPURAN'S MEN.
THE OTHERS GOT AWAY BUT OTHENAN WAS CAUGHT.
LET ME GO! LET ME GO!
WE WILL, WHEN WE REACH THE TAMPURAN'S HOUSE.
THEY DRAGGED THE STRUGGLING OTHENAN ...
... AND TOOK HIM TO THE TAMPURAN.
SIR, HE WAS STEALING MANGOES. WE CAUGHT HIM WITH GREAT DIFFICULTY. HE IS TOUGH.
WHAT! IT TOOK THREE OF YOU TO CATCH HIM. HE WILL BE A THREAT TO US WHEN HE GROWS UP. HE MUST BE HANGED.

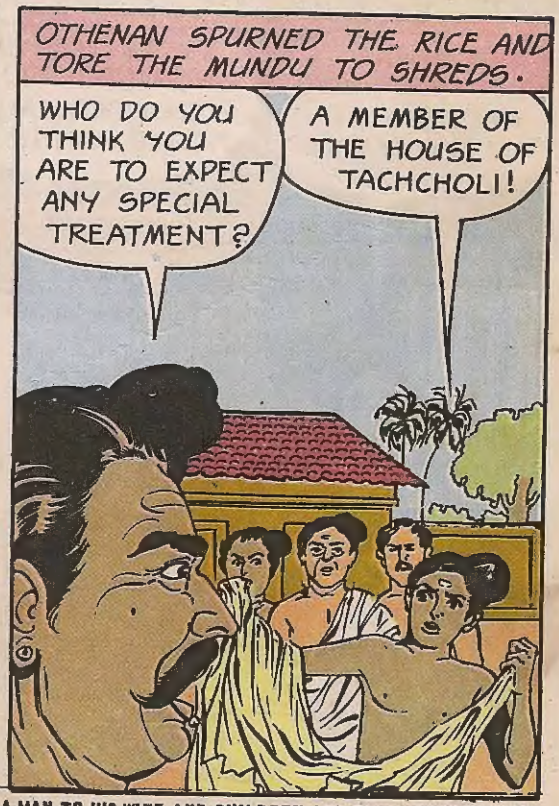




* THE ART OF SELF-DEFENCE WHICH INCLUDES FENCING AND JUDO.







THE HARVEST FESTIVAL OF KERALA, WHEN SPECIAL GIFTS ARE GIVEN BY A MAN TO HIS WIFE AND CHILDREN AND THEIR ACCEPTANCE IS PERMITTED BY THE WIFE'S FAMILY. ** A PIECE OF CLOTH SIMILAR TO A LUNGI, USED BY MEN AND WOMEN OF KERALA ALIKE.

SUDDENLY, THERE WAS A COMMOTION INSIDE THE HOUSE. THE SPIRIT OF BHAGAWATI HAD COME TO AVENGE THE INSULT TO HER DEVOTEE'S SON.

E-E-E-E A-AH-AH

SIR, SIR, YOUR NIECES ARE POSSESSED BY THE SPIRIT OF BHAGAWATI

LOCK THEM IN A ROOM AND LET US VACATE THE HOUSE FOR THE TIME BEING.

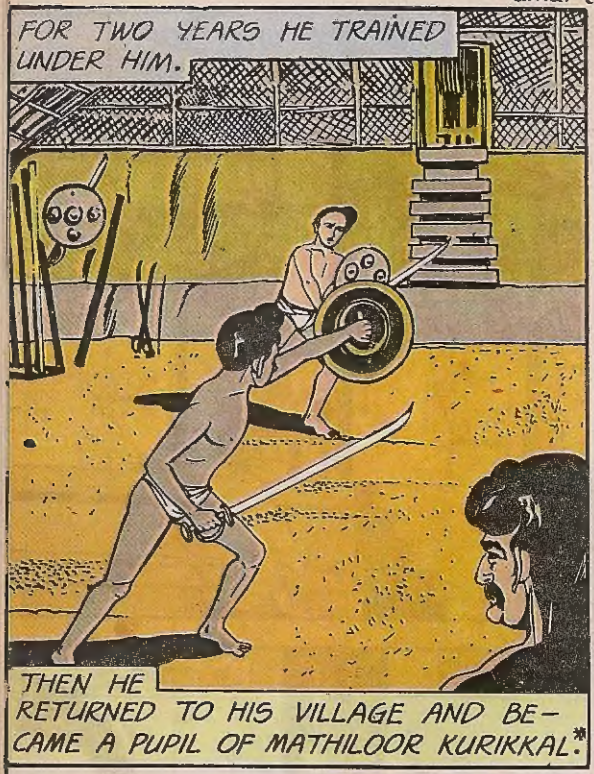
HA! HA! HA!

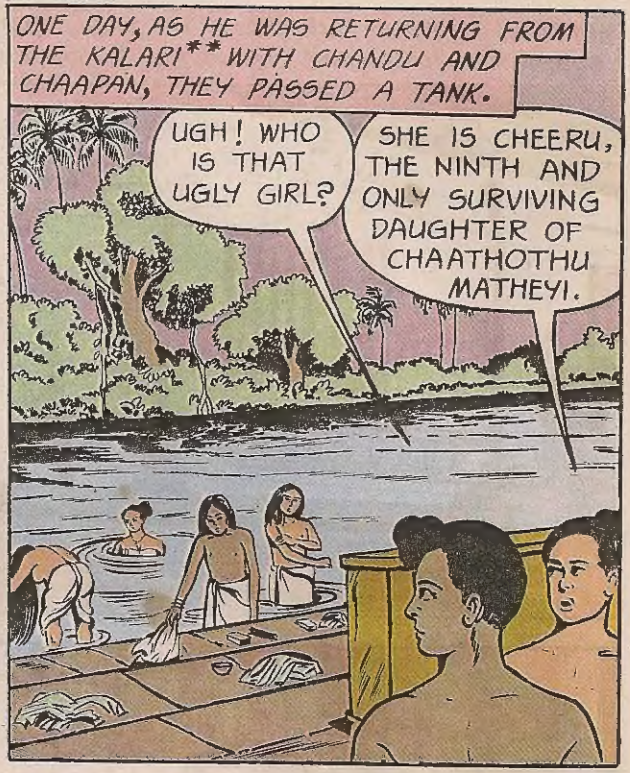
AS HE TURNED HOMEWARDS, OTHENAN MADE UP HIS MIND ABOUT THE FUTURE.

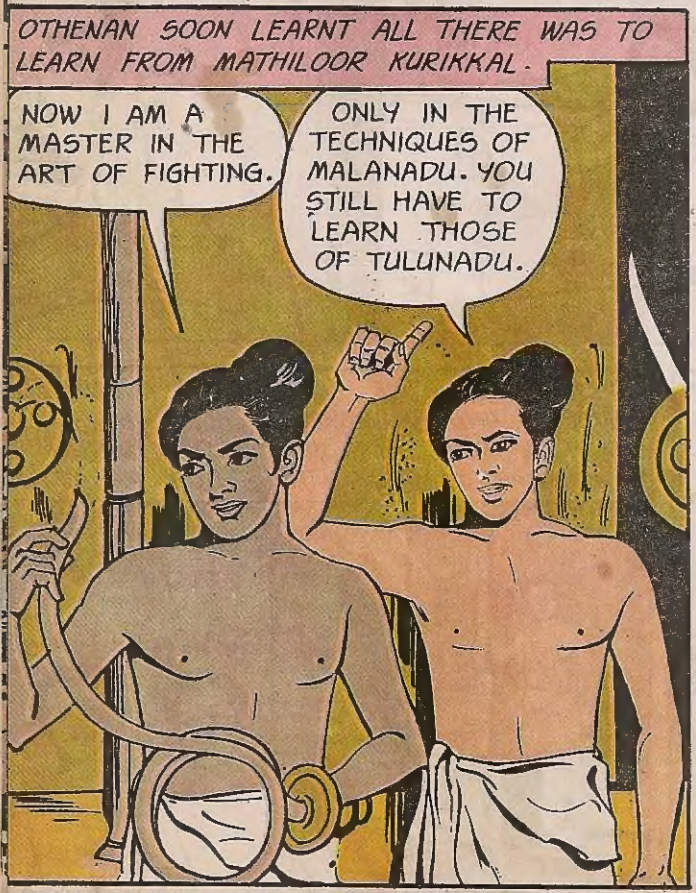
NO UNCLES; AN INDIFFERENT FATHER; A PEACE-LOVING BROTHER; I WILL HAVE TO RELY ON MYSELF TO REGAIN THE WEALTH OF THE FAMILY.

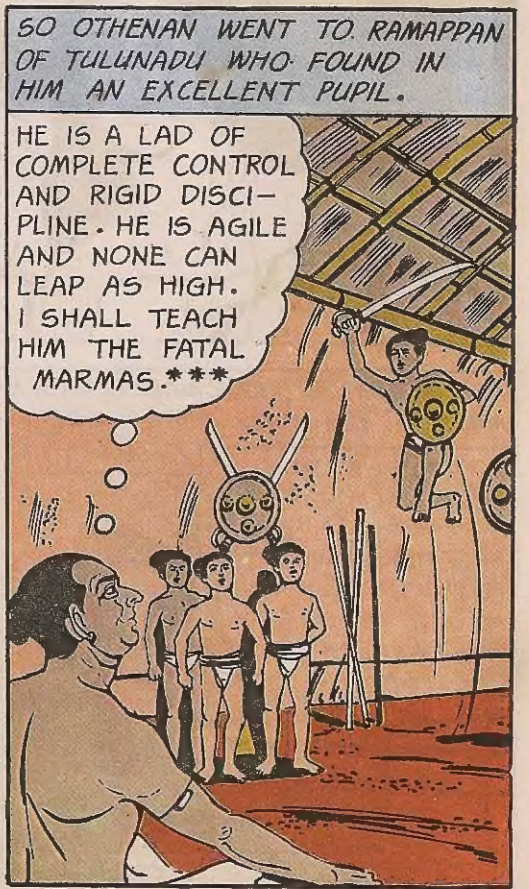
HE HAD SUDDENLY GROWN UP.

A FEW DAYS LATER, WITH KOMA KURUP'S CONSENT AND BHAGAWATI'S BLESSINGS, OTHENAN MADE HIS WAY WITH CHANDU TO CHERAYI PANIKKER TO STUDY PAYATTU.









*GURU OR TEACHER. **GYMNASIUM WHERE PAYATTU IS TAUGHT. ***NERVE CENTRES BY TOUCHING WHICH AN EXPERT CAN KILL HIS OPPONENT.

EVEN THAT MOST DIFFICULT TECHNIQUE OF PAYATTU, OTHENAN MASTERED WITH EASE. RAMAPPAN WAS IMMENSELY PLEASED.

OTHENAN, I SHALL MAKE YOU INVINCIBLE. SO LONG AS THIS AMULET IS ON YOUR PERSON NO FIREARMS CAN HARM YOU.

TO YOU, O KURIKKAL, I DEDICATE ALL MY FUTURE VICTORIES.

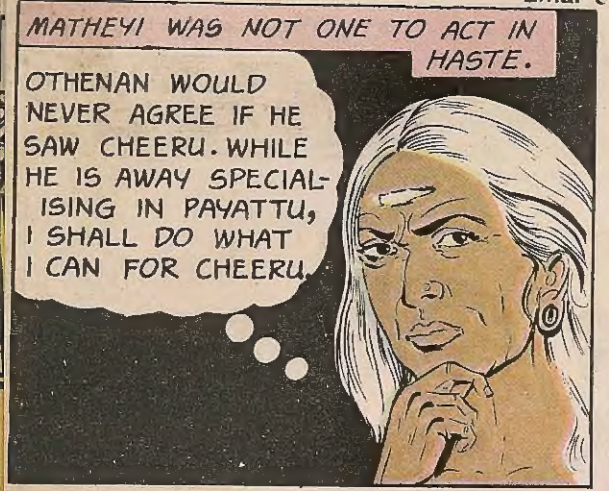
MEANWHILE IN THE HOUSE OF CHAATHOTHU MATHEYI —

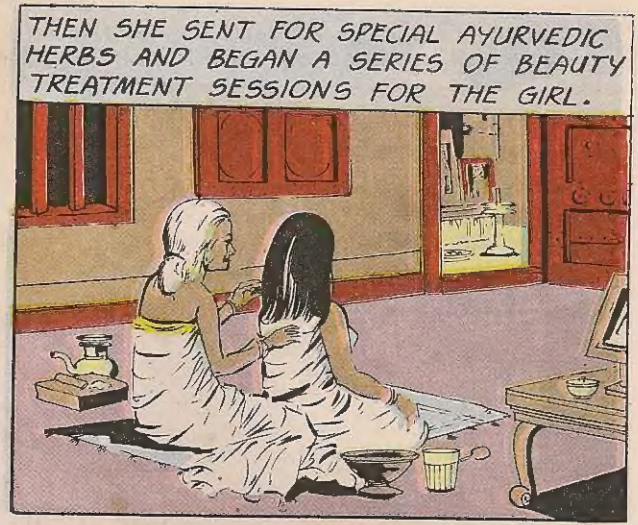
ALAS! WHY SHOULD CHEERU, THE ONLY ONE TO SURVIVE, BE SO UNGAINLY? WILL SHE EVER HAVE ANY SUITORS?

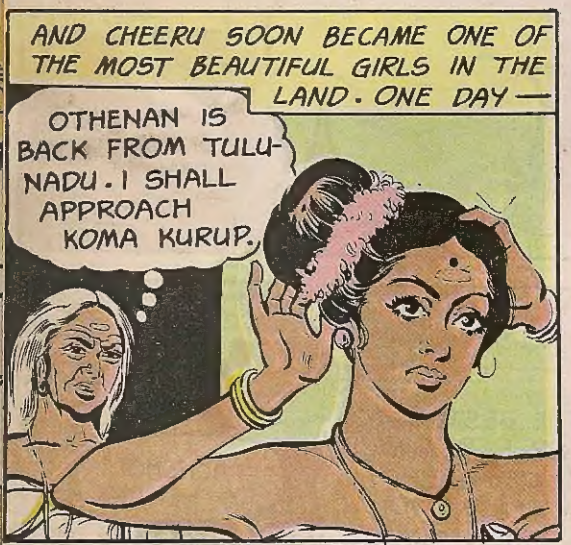
THE WORRIED MOTHER HAD CHEERU'S HOROSCOPE READ.

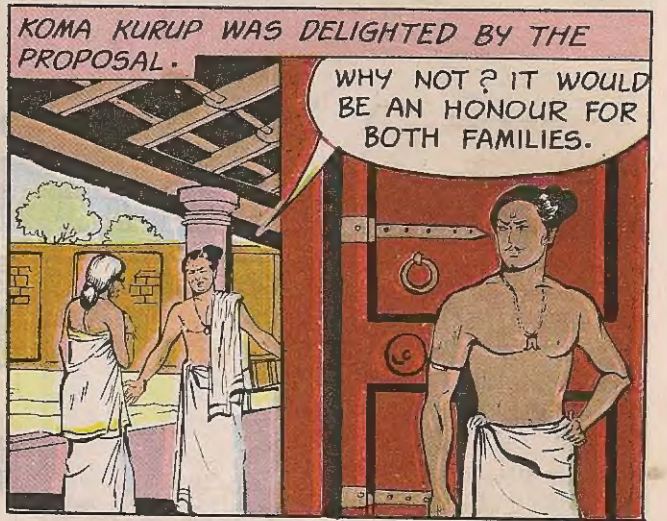
THE BEST MATCH FOR HER WOULD BE THACHCHOLI OTHENAN. YOU SHOULD SPEAK TO KOMA KURUP RIGHT AWAY.

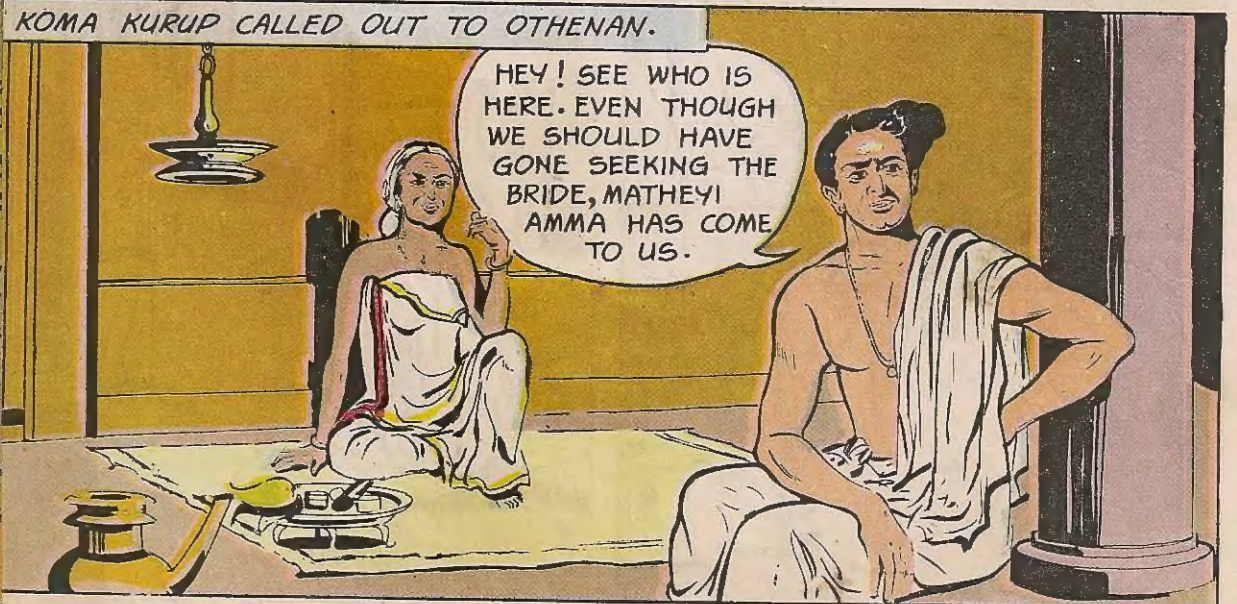
TACHCHOLI OTHENAN!


MATHEYI WAS NOT ONE TO ACT IN HASTE.
OTHENAN WOULD NEVER AGREE IF HE SAW CHEERU. WHILE HE IS AWAY SPECIALISING IN PAYATTU, I SHALL DO WHAT I CAN FOR CHEERU.

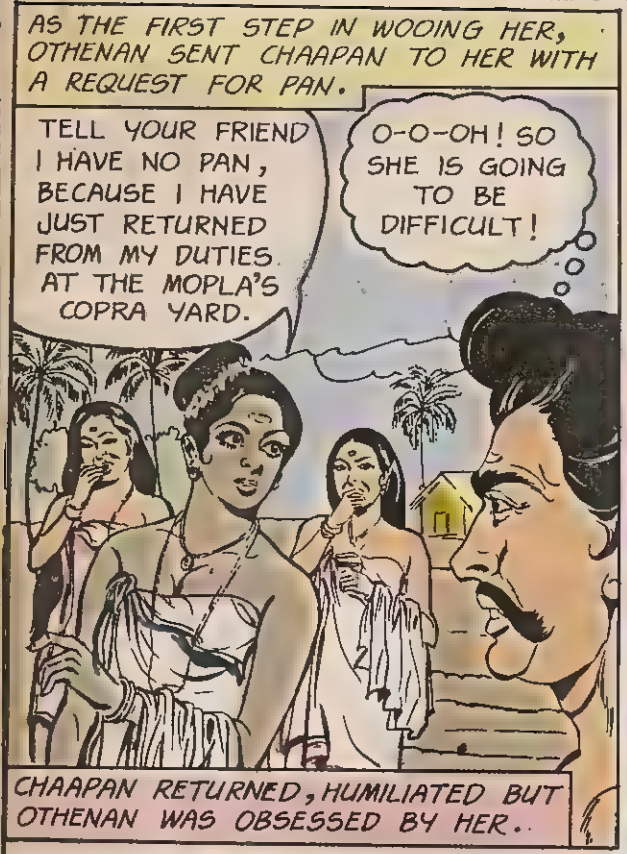

THEN SHE SENT FOR SPECIAL AYURVEDIC HERBS AND BEGAN A SERIES OF BEAUTY TREATMENT SESSIONS FOR THE GIRL.

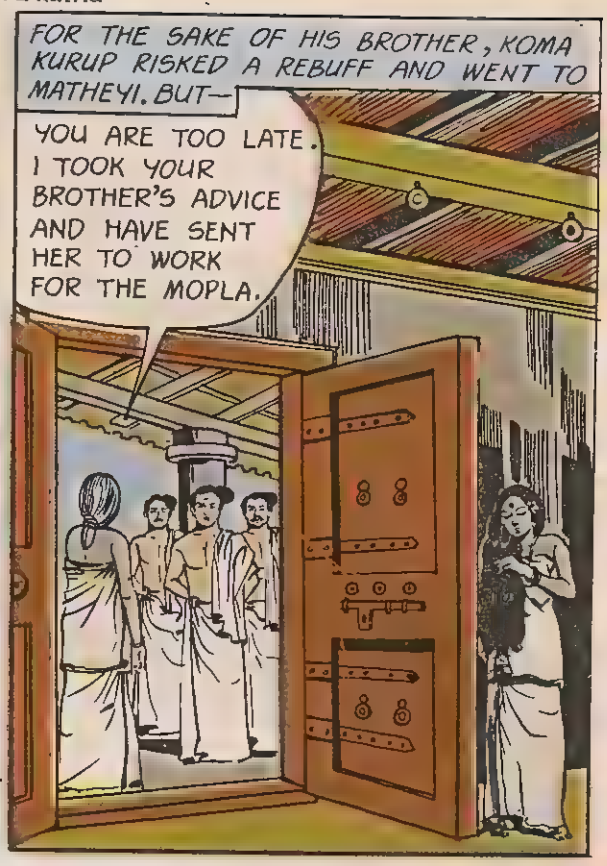

AND CHEERU SOON BECAME ONE OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL GIRLS IN THE LAND. ONE DAY —
OTHENAN IS BACK FROM TULUNADU. I SHALL APPROACH KOMA KURUP.


KOMA KURUP WAS DELIGHTED BY THE PROPOSAL.
WHY NOT? IT WOULD BE AN HONOUR FOR BOTH FAMILIES.

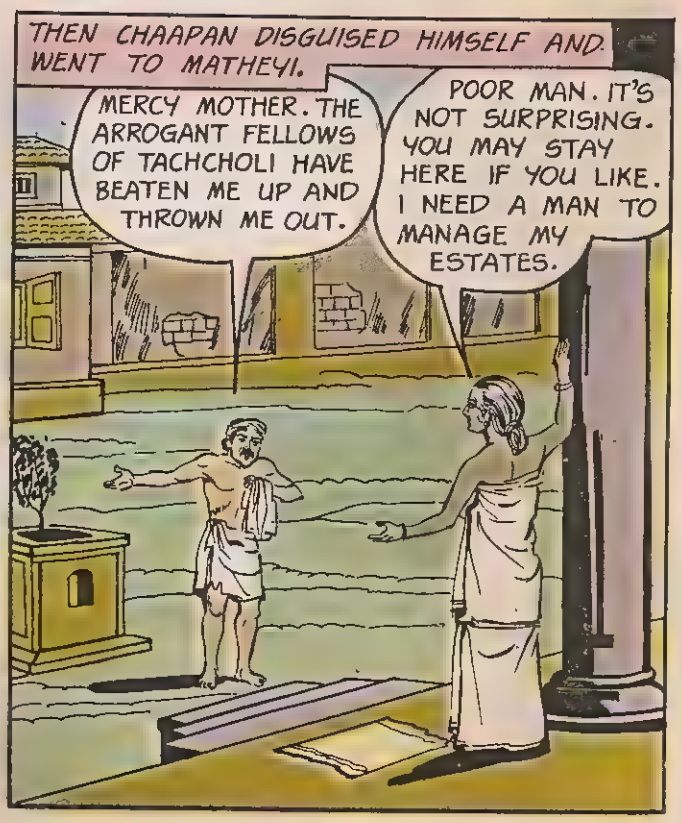

KOMA KURUP CALLED OUT TO OTHENAN.
HEY! SEE WHO IS HERE. EVEN THOUGH WE SHOULD HAVE GONE SEEKING THE BRIDE, MATHEYI AMMA HAS COME TO US.

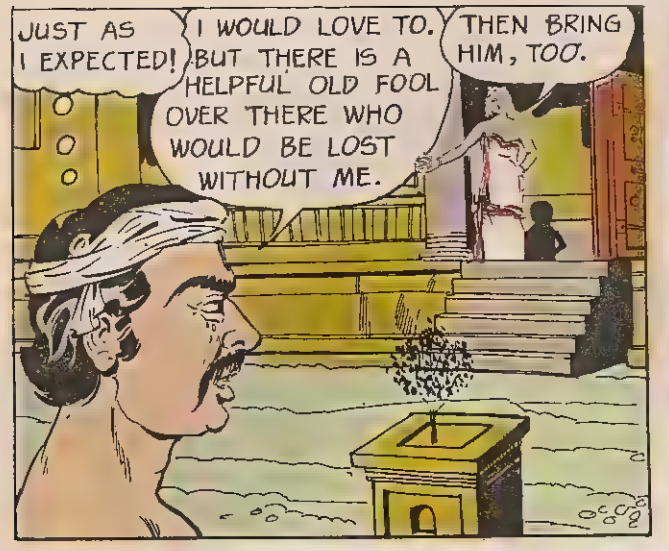
* MUSLIM MERCHANT. ** COCONUT KERNELS.

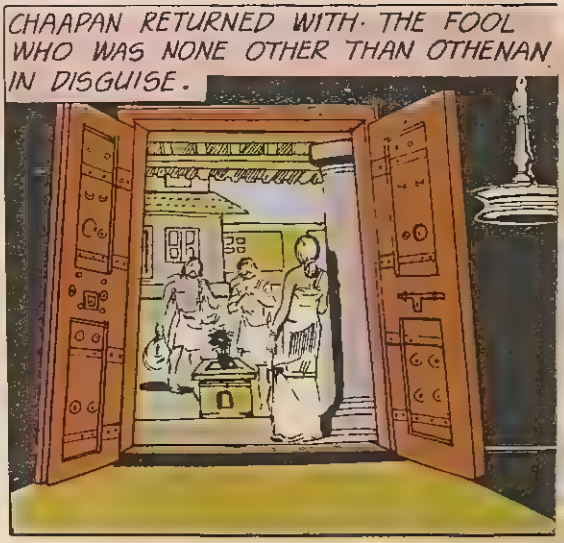

AS THE FIRST STEP IN WOOING HER, OTHENAN SENT CHAAPAN TO HER WITH A REQUEST FOR PAN.
TELL YOUR FRIEND I HAVE NO PAN, BECAUSE I HAVE JUST RETURNED FROM MY DUTIES AT THE MOPLA'S COPRA YARD.
O-O-OH! SO SHE IS GOING TO BE DIFFICULT!
CHAAPAN RETURNED, HUMILIATED BUT OTHENAN WAS OBSESSED BY HER..

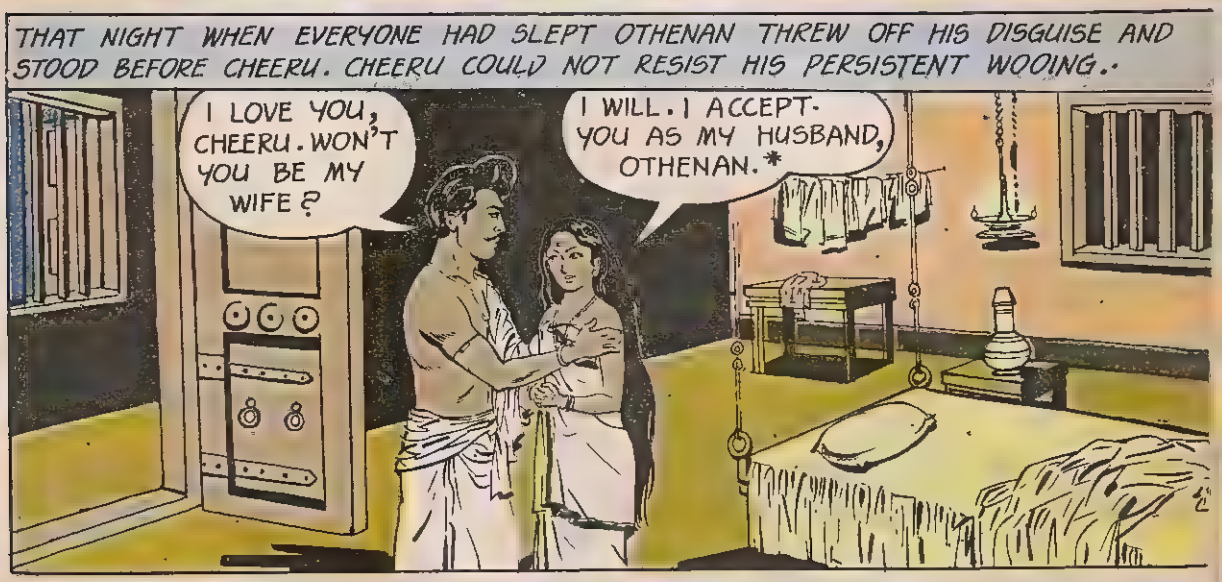

FOR THE SAKE OF HIS BROTHER, KOMA KURUP RISKED A REBUFF AND WENT TO MATHEYI. BUT—
YOU ARE TOO LATE. I TOOK YOUR BROTHER'S ADVICE AND HAVE SENT HER TO WORK FOR THE MOPLA.

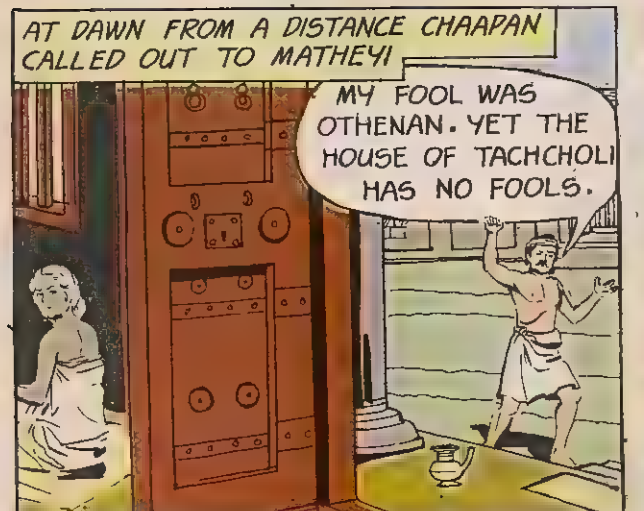
LATER CHAAPAN CAME TO OTHENAN.
DON'T DESPAIR. CHEERU SHALL YET BE YOURS. LISTEN...

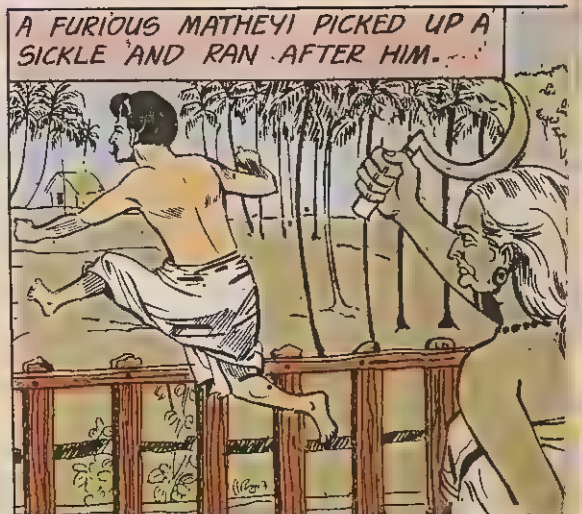

THEN CHAAPAN DISGUISED HIMSELF AND WENT TO MATHEYI.
MERCY MOTHER. THE ARROGANT FELLOWS OF TACHCHOLI HAVE BEATEN ME UP AND THROWN ME OUT.
POOR MAN. IT'S NOT SURPRISING. YOU MAY STAY HERE IF YOU LIKE. I NEED A MAN TO MANAGE MY ESTATES.



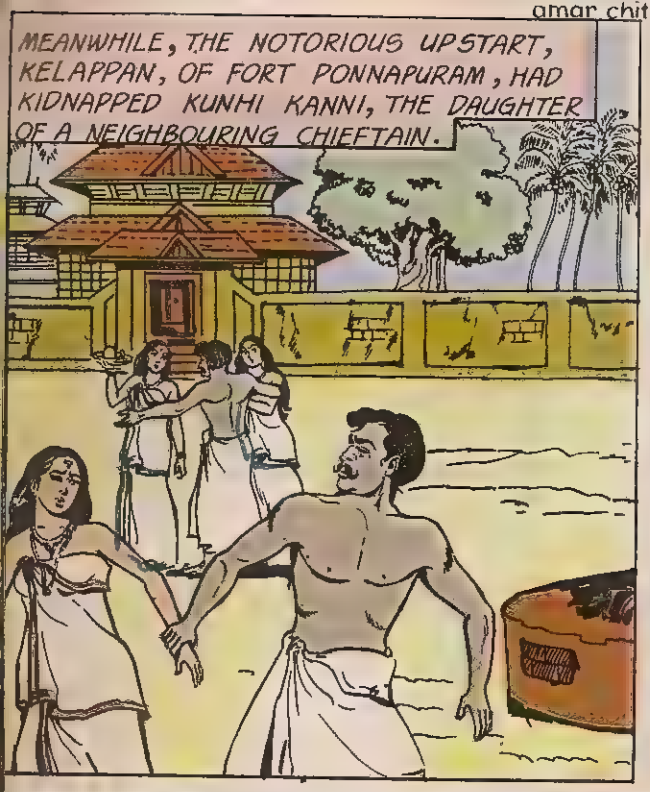


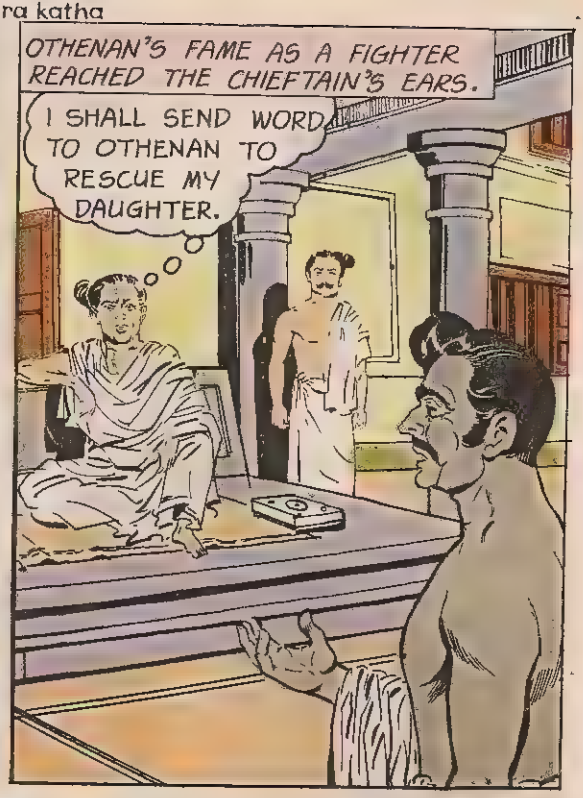






*MARRIAGE IN THE MATRILINEAL SOCIETIES OF KERALA WAS A CONTRACT, A SECULAR AFFAIR AND NOT A SACRED ONE AS IN THE REST OF INDIA.

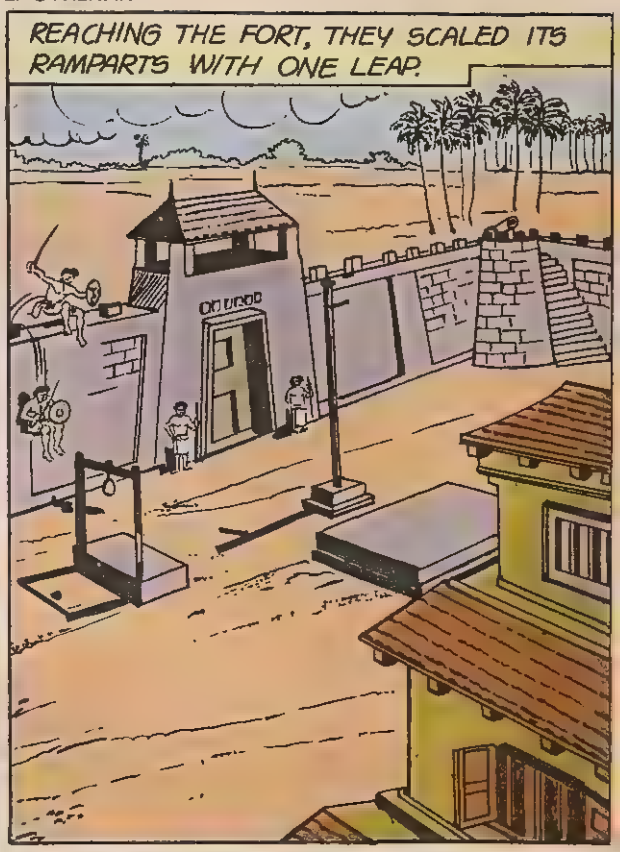

MEANWHILE, THE NOTORIOUS UPSTART, KELAPPAN, OF FORT PONNAPURAM, HAD KIDNAPPED KUNHI KANNI, THE DAUGHTER OF A NEIGHBOURING CHIEFTAIN.

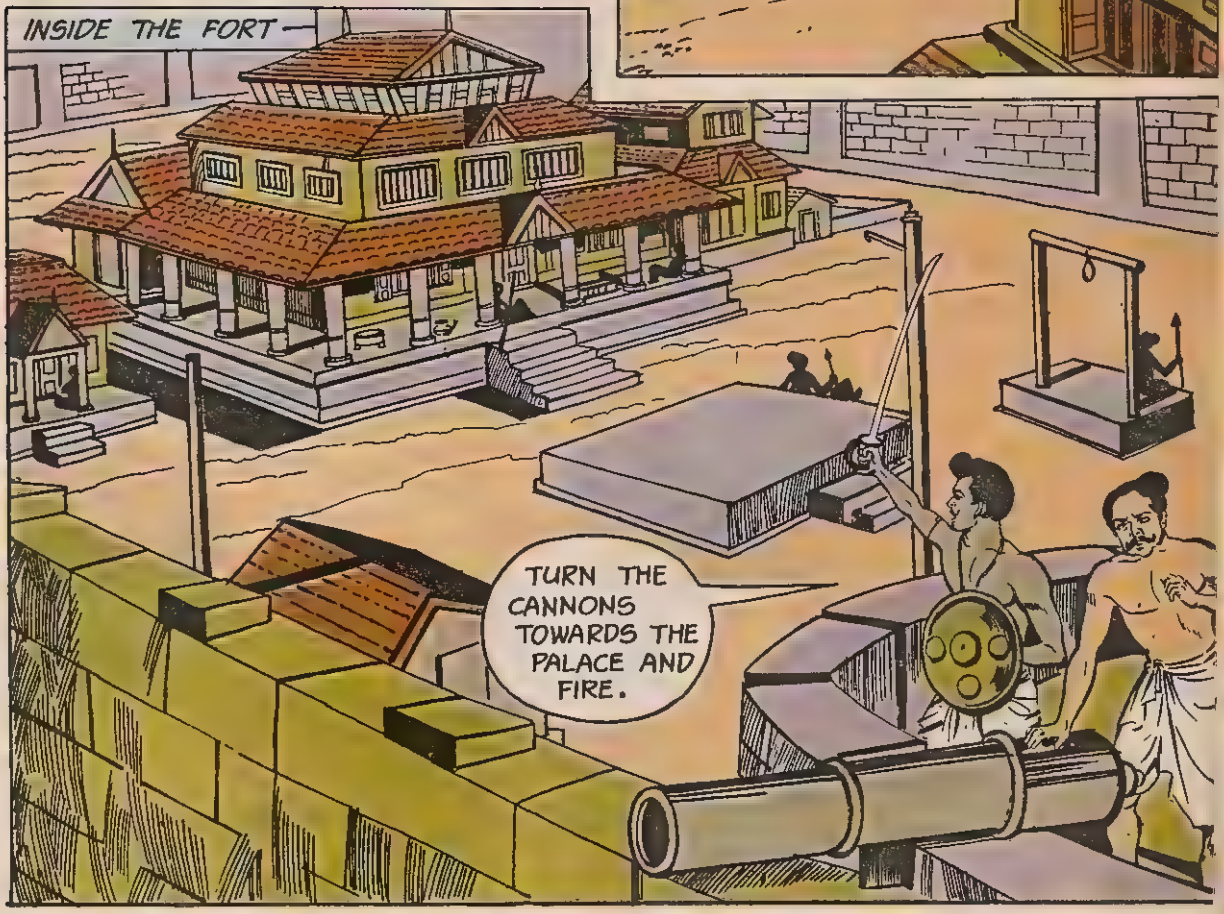

OTHENAN'S FAME AS A FIGHTER REACHED THE CHIEFTAIN'S EARS.
I SHALL SEND WORD TO OTHENAN TO RESCUE MY DAUGHTER.

WHEN THE APPEAL REACHED OTHENAN, KOMA KURUP WAS WITH HIM.
IT IS THE SAME SCOUNDREL WHO USURPED OUR LANDS.
THEN I MUST FIGHT HIM AND TAKE WHAT HE HAS ILLEGALLY GRABBED.

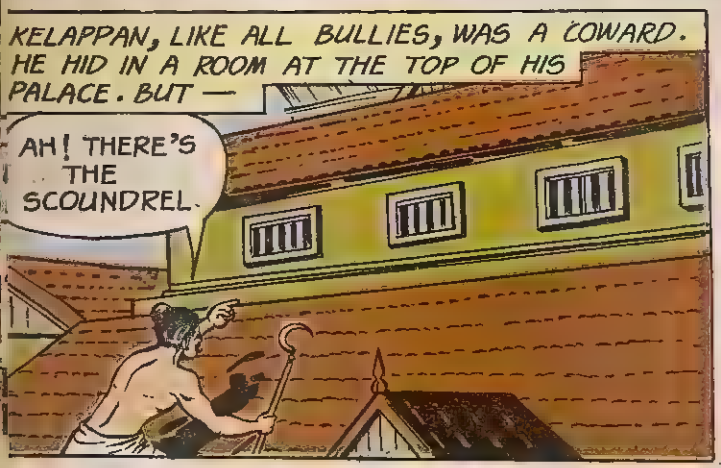
BUT KELAPPAN'S FORT IS IMPREGNABLE
NEVER MIND. KELAPPAN IS NO MATCH FOR ME. BESIDES MINE IS A JUST CAUSE. I'LL TAKE CHAAPAN WITH ME.

SO OTHENAN AND CHAAPAN SET OUT FOR THE FORT.

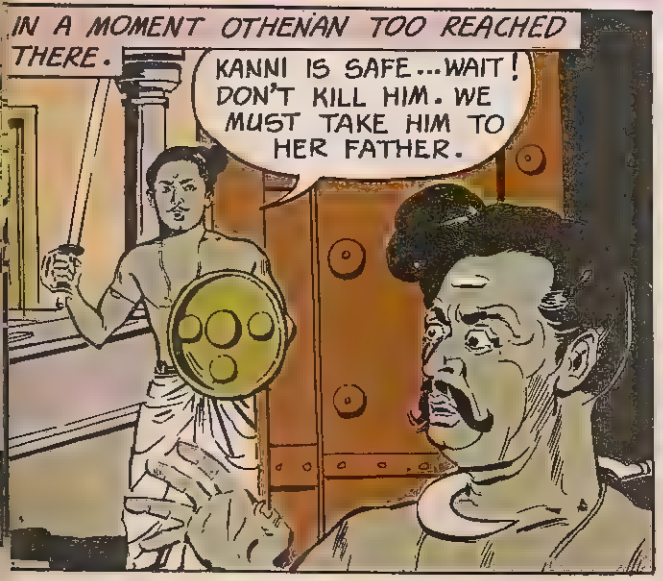

REACHING THE FORT, THEY SCALED ITS RAMPARTS WITH ONE LEAP.

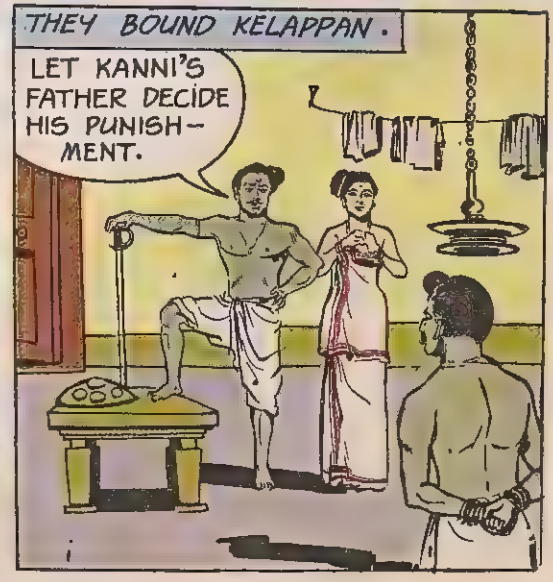

INSIDE THE FORT—
TURN THE CANNONS TOWARDS THE PALACE AND FIRE.

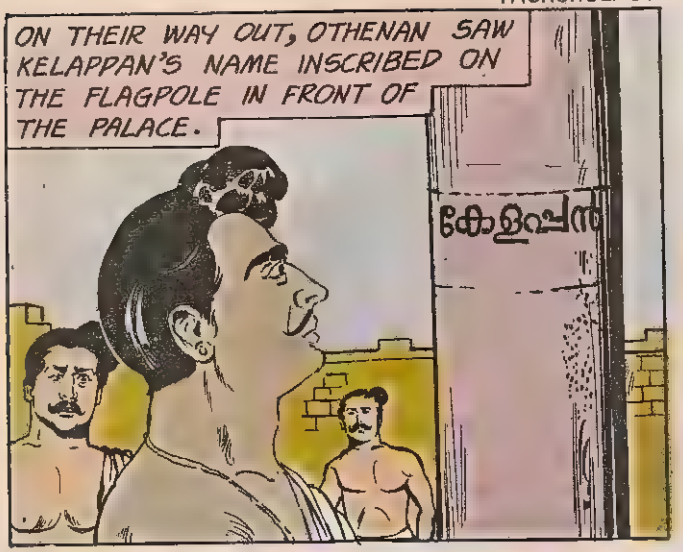
IT'S OTHENAN!
OTHENAN!

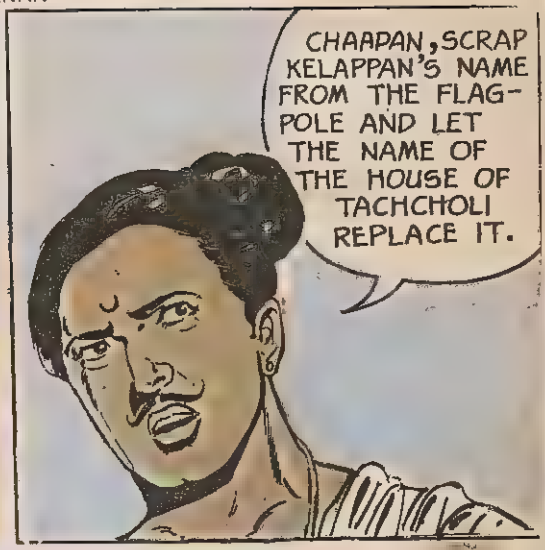

KELAPPAN, LIKE ALL BULLIES, WAS A COWARD. HE HID IN A ROOM AT THE TOP OF HIS PALACE. BUT —
AH! THERE'S THE SCOUNDREL.

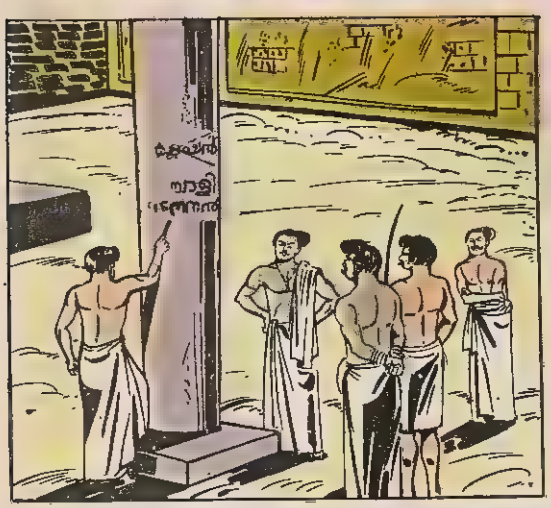
CHAAPAN HAD SPOTTED KELAPPAN. HE LEAPT UP AND—


IN A MOMENT OTHENAN TOO REACHED THERE.
KANNI IS SAFE...WAIT! DON'T KILL HIM. WE MUST TAKE HIM TO HER FATHER.

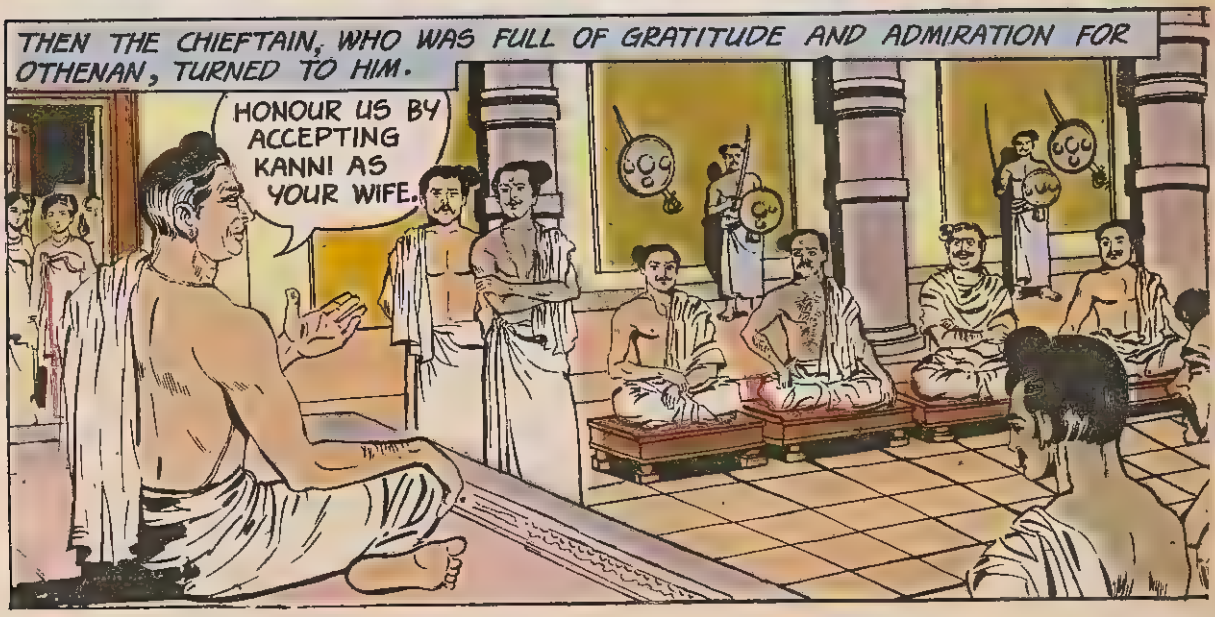

THEY BOUND KELAPPAN.
LET KANNI'S FATHER DECIDE HIS PUNISH-MENT.


ON THEIR WAY OUT, OTHENAN SAW KELAPPAN'S NAME INSCRIBED ON THE FLAGPOLE IN FRONT OF THE PALACE.


CHAAPAN, SCRAP KELAPPAN'S NAME FROM THE FLAG-POLE AND LET THE NAME OF THE HOUSE OF TACHCHOLI REPLACE IT.



LATER, WHEN THEY HANDED KELAPPAN OVER TO THE OLD CHIEFTAIN —
I CONDEMN YOU TO THE GALLOWS.


THEN THE CHIEFTAIN, WHO WAS FULL OF GRATITUDE AND ADMIRATION FOR OTHENAN, TURNED TO HIM.
HONOUR US BY ACCEPTING KANNI AS YOUR WIFE.

OTHENAN ACCEPTED THE OFFER AND LED HER HOME WITH THE FULL FORMALITIES BEFITTING A BRIDE FROM AN ARISTOCRATIC FAMILY. CHEERU AS THE SENIOR WIFE WAS THERE TO WELCOME HER.

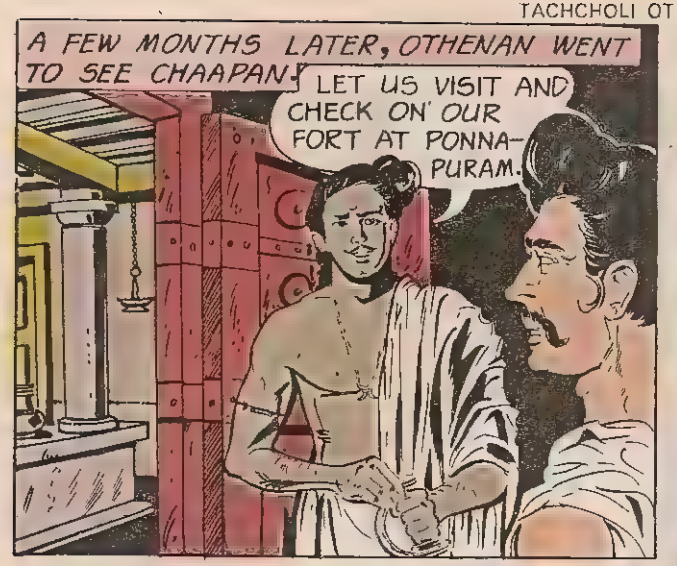
MEANWHILE, KELAPPAN'S NEPHEW, KELU, RETURNED FROM TULUNADU AFTER AN EXTENDED TRAINING IN PAYATTU THERE. AS HE ENTERED THE FORT—

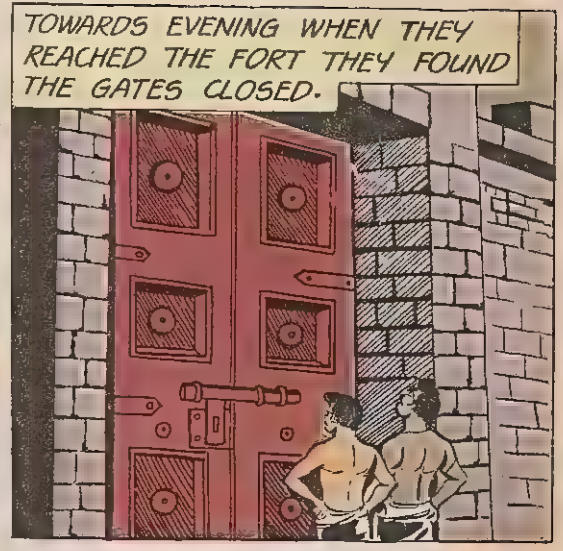
WHAT! THE NAME OF TACHCHOLI ON THE FLAGPOLE!

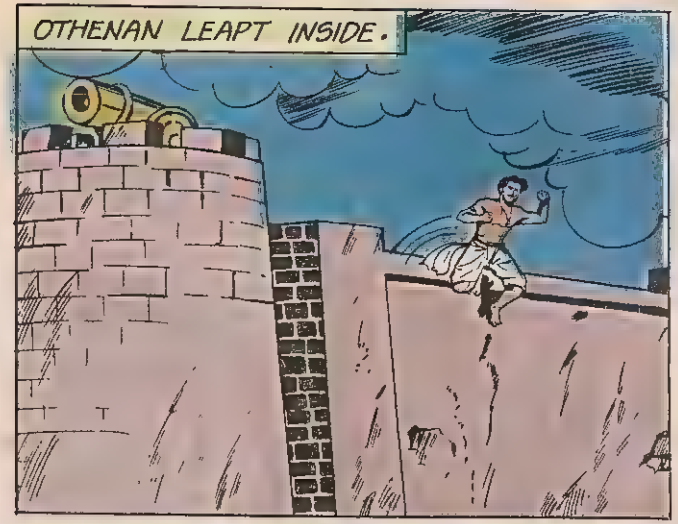
ONE OF THE OLD GUARDS RUSHED FORWARD AND TOLD HIM OF ALL THAT HAD HAPPENED.

SINCE THAT DAY, WE TAKE ORDERS FROM OTHENAN.

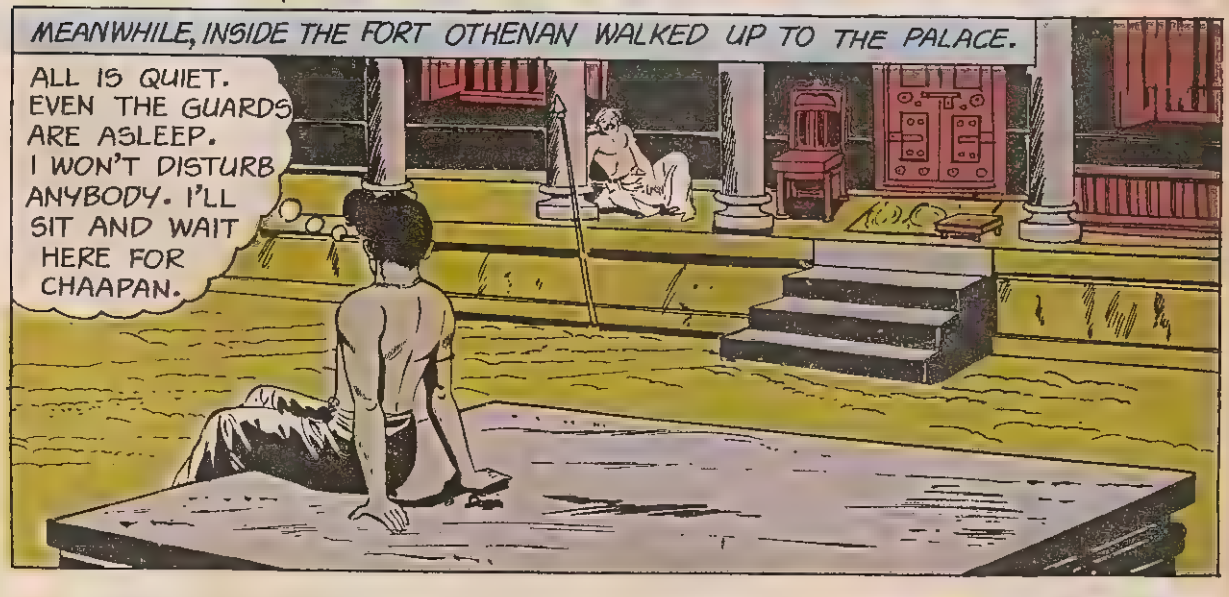
YOU WILL NOW TAKE ORDERS FROM ME. I AM NOT AFRAID OF OTHENAN. HE KNOWS NO TRICK WHICH I DON'T. LET HIM COME.


A FEW MONTHS LATER, OTHENAN WENT TO SEE CHAAPAN.
LET US VISIT AND CHECK ON OUR FORT AT PONNA-PURAM.


TOWARDS EVENING WHEN THEY REACHED THE FORT THEY FOUND THE GATES CLOSED.

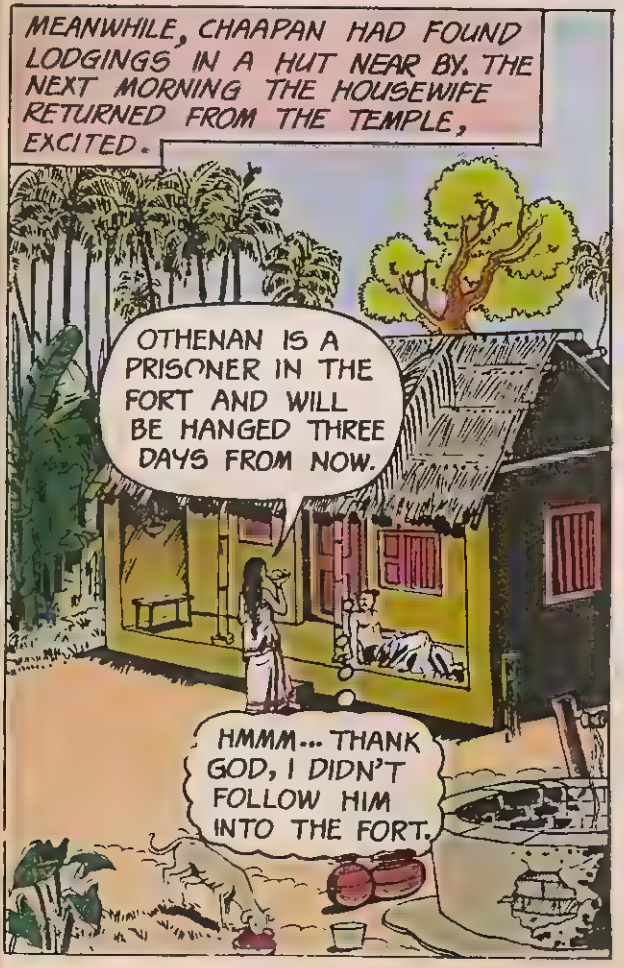

OTHENAN LEAPT INSIDE.

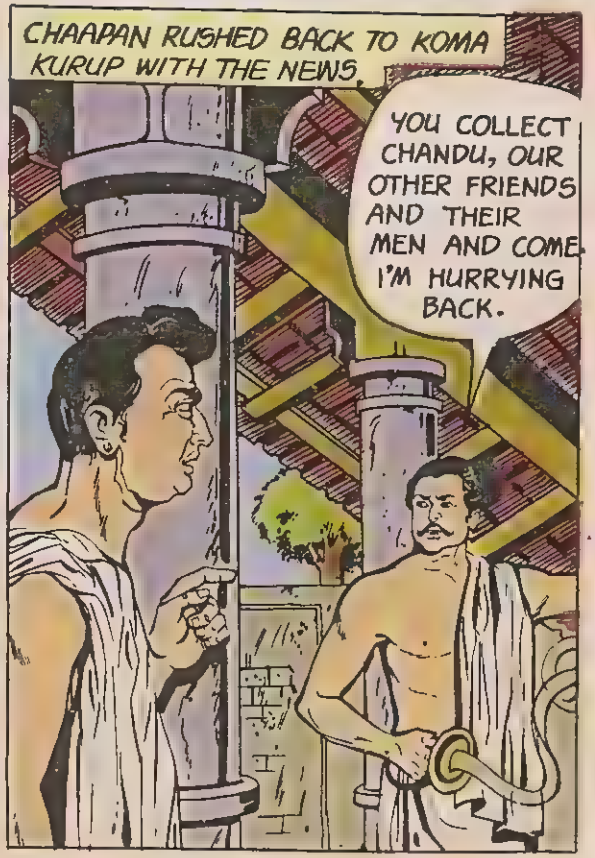
BUT CHAAPAN HESITATED.
WHY ARE THE GATES BARRED? I THINK I'D BETTER WAIT OUTSIDE.


MEANWHILE, INSIDE THE FORT OTHENAN WALKED UP TO THE PALACE.
ALL IS QUIET. EVEN THE GUARDS ARE ASLEEP. I WON'T DISTURB ANYBODY. I'LL SIT AND WAIT HERE FOR CHAAPAN.

BUT SLEEP OVERCAME THE UNWARY OTHENAN. TOWARDS DAWN —
AM I DREAMING? ISN'T THIS OTHENAN HIMSELF?
Z-Z-Z-

THE GUARD RAN TO KELU FOR INSTRUCTIONS.
CHAIN HIM AND THROW HIM INTO THE DUNGEONS.


MEANWHILE, CHAAPAN HAD FOUND LODGINGS IN A HUT NEAR BY. THE NEXT MORNING THE HOUSEWIFE RETURNED FROM THE TEMPLE, EXCITED.
OTHENAN IS A PRISONER IN THE FORT AND WILL BE HANGED THREE DAYS FROM NOW.
HMMM... THANK GOD, I DIDN'T FOLLOW HIM INTO THE FORT.


CHAAPAN RUSHED BACK TO KOMA KURUP WITH THE NEWS.
YOU COLLECT CHANDU, OUR OTHER FRIENDS AND THEIR MEN AND COME. I'M HURRYING BACK.

THE RESOURCEFUL CHAAPAN HAD ANOTHER TRICK UP HIS SLEEVE. HE WENT TO THE FIELD AND PICKED UP TWO WATER-MELONS.

THE WICKED KELU THIRSTS FOR BLOOD. BY GOD! YOU SHALL QUENCH IT.

THEN, DISGUISING HIMSELF AS A SANYASI, CHAAPAN PROCEEDED TO THE FORT.

HALT! YOU CAN'T ENTER. MY MASTER'S ORDERS.

I AM A MAN OF GOD. LEAD ME TO YOUR MASTER.

THE GUARD, AFTER GETTING KELU'S PERMISSION, LED CHAAPAN TO HIM.

TAKE THIS MELON. IT IS CONSECRATED. YOUR FUTURE IS BRIGHT BECAUSE I SEE THAT YOUR ENEMY IS IN YOUR POWER. SHOW HIM NO MERCY.

YOU TRULY ARE A SEER. PLEASE STAY WITH US TILL TOMORROW FOR, THEN WILL I SEND THE ENEMY TO THE GALLOWS.

THE NEXT DAY —

YOU ARE MAGNANIMOUS. UNCHAIN THIS MAN. LET THIS CONSECRATED JUICE BE HIS LAST DRINK.

AND LET MY FRIEND BE STRONG WITH THE HERBS I HAVE MIXED INTO IT.

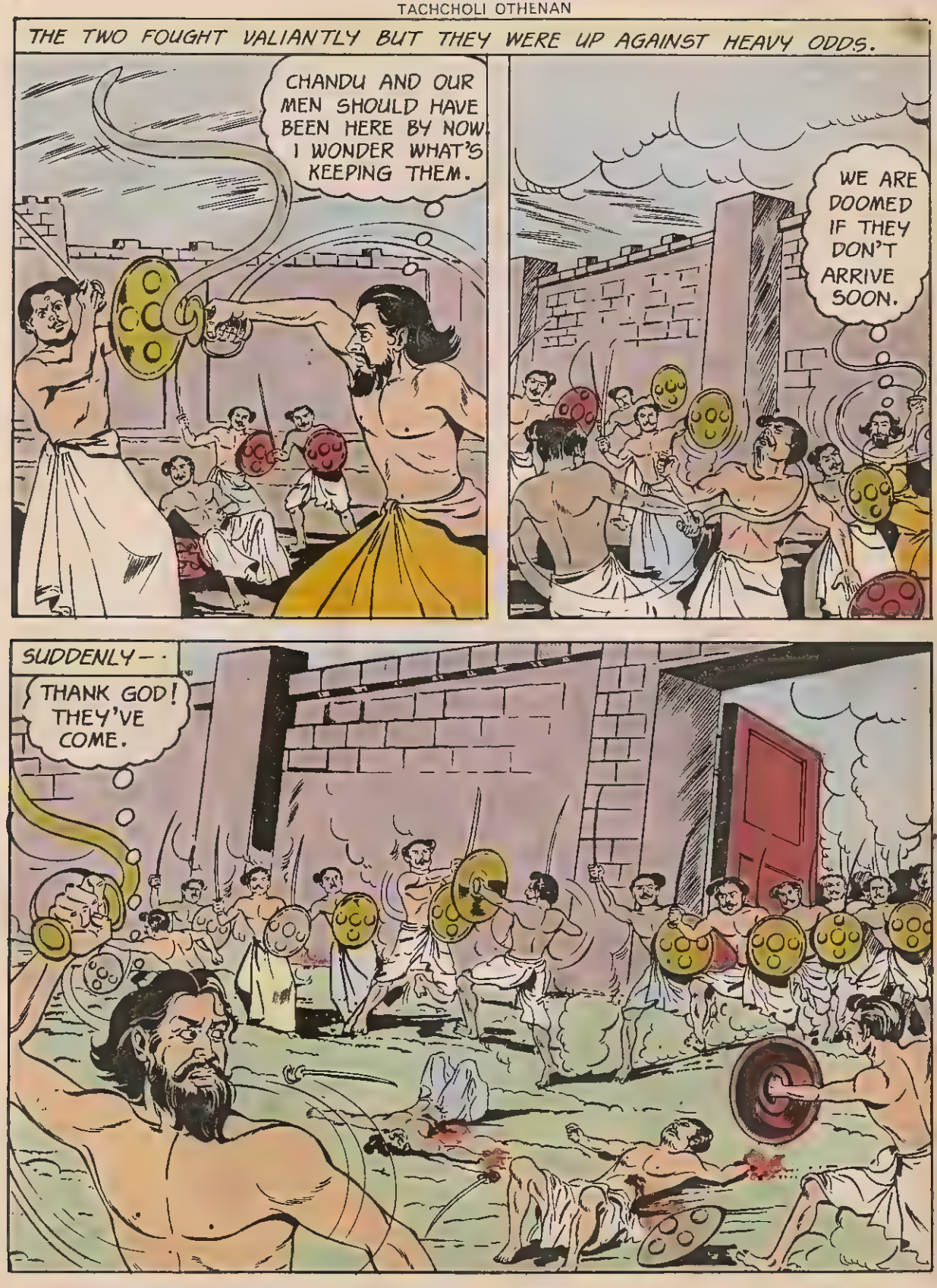
FLATTERED, KELU GAVE HIS ASSENT. OTHENAN WAS UNCHAINED.

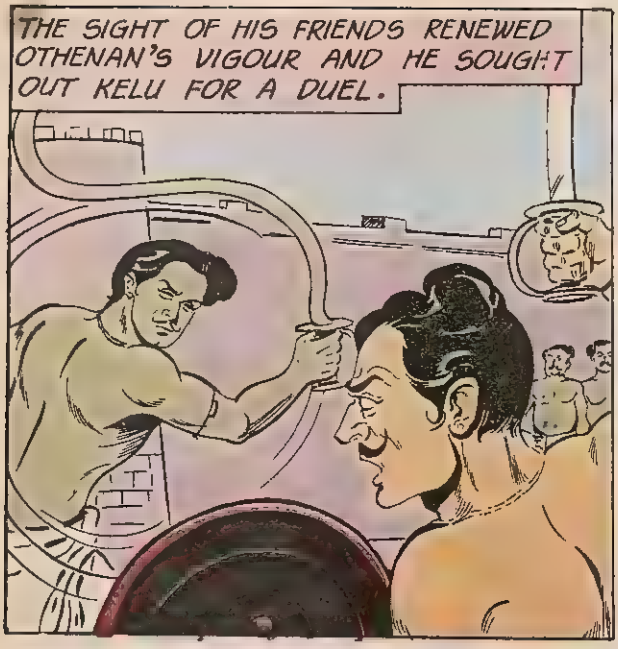
DRINK IT TO THE LEES AND FIND YOUR WEAPON INSIDE.

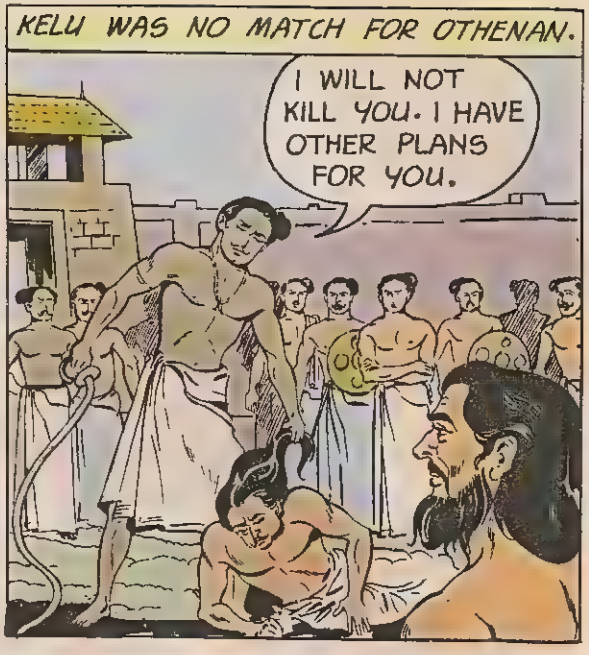
IN A MATTER OF SECONDS, OTHENAN FOUND THE WEAPON AND —

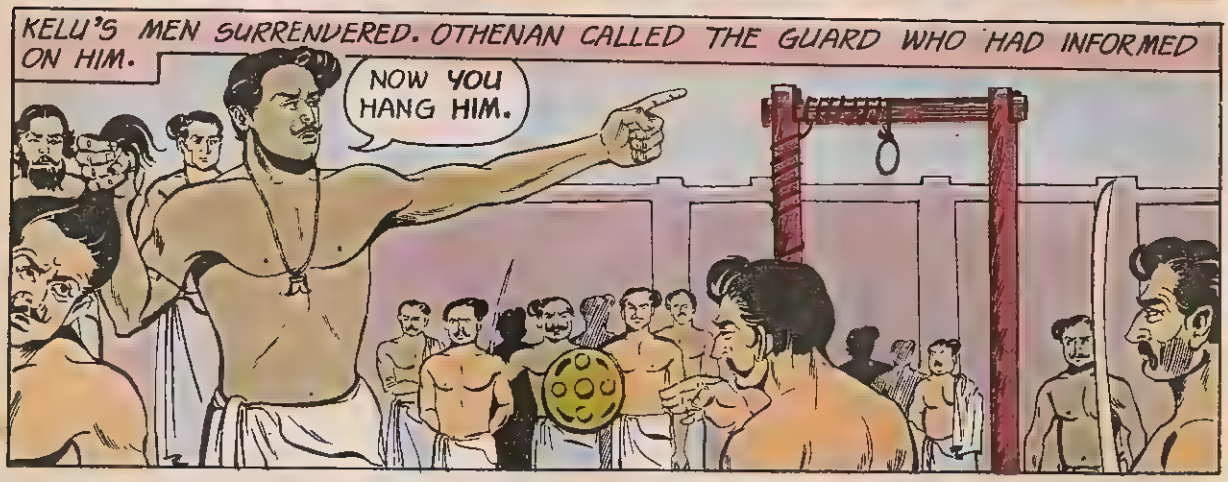
AS SOON AS KELU AND HIS MEN RECOVERED FROM THE SHOCK, THEY SET UPON CHAAPAN AND OTHENAN.

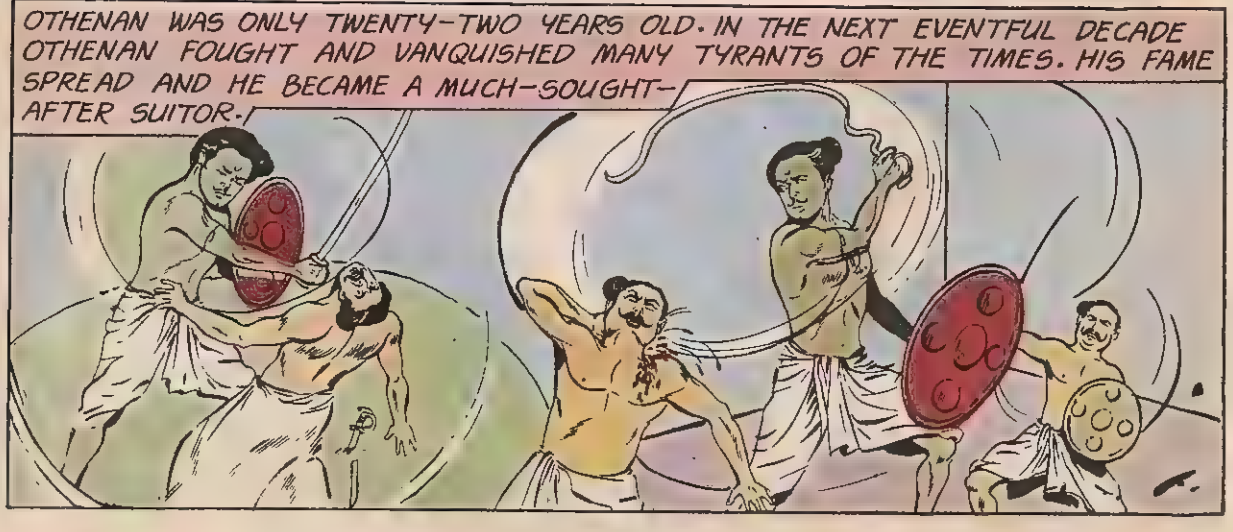
HE IS A FAKE.

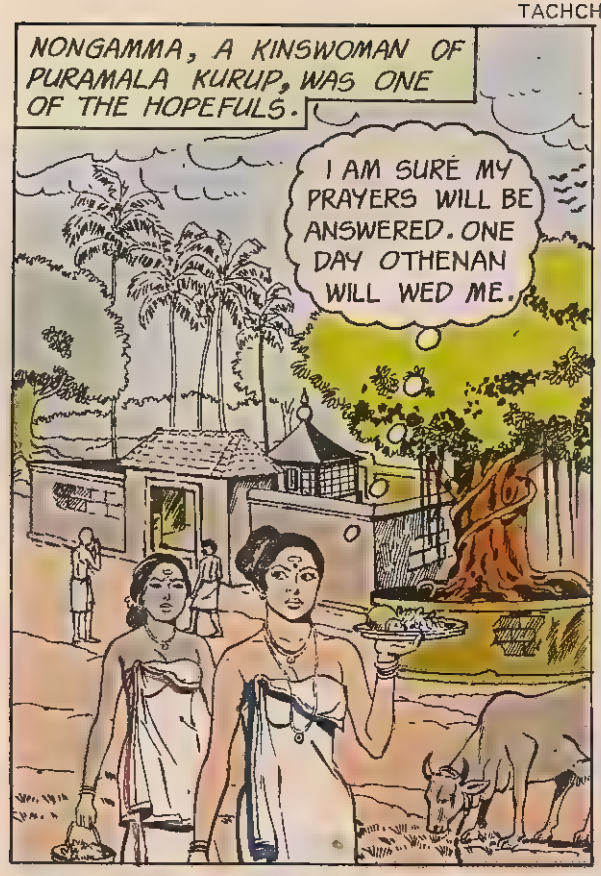

THE TWO FOUGHT VALIANTLY BUT THEY WERE UP AGAINST HEAVY ODDS.
CHANDU AND OUR MEN SHOULD HAVE BEEN HERE BY NOW. I WONDER WHAT'S KEEPING THEM.
WE ARE DOOMED IF THEY DON'T ARRIVE SOON.
SUDDENLY--
THANK GOD! THEY'VE COME.

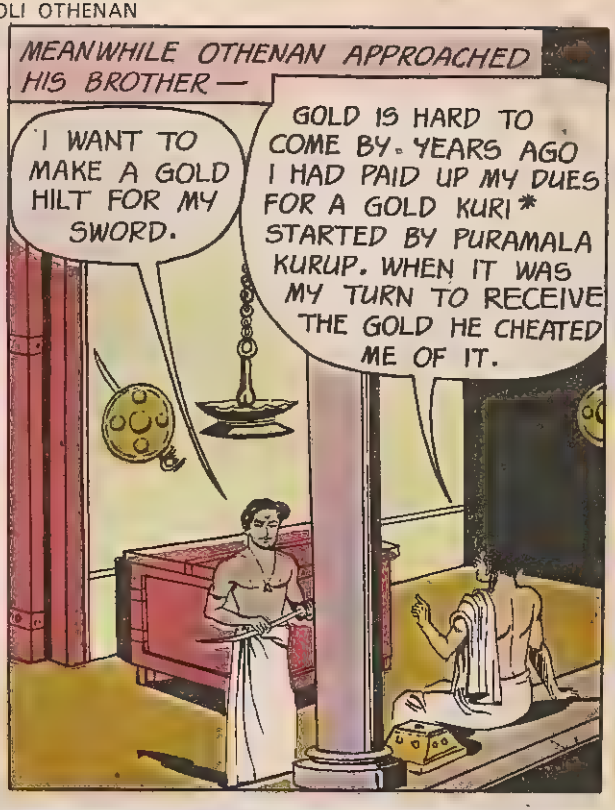

THE SIGHT OF HIS FRIENDS RENEWED OTHENAN'S VIGOUR AND HE SOUGHT OUT KELU FOR A DUEL.

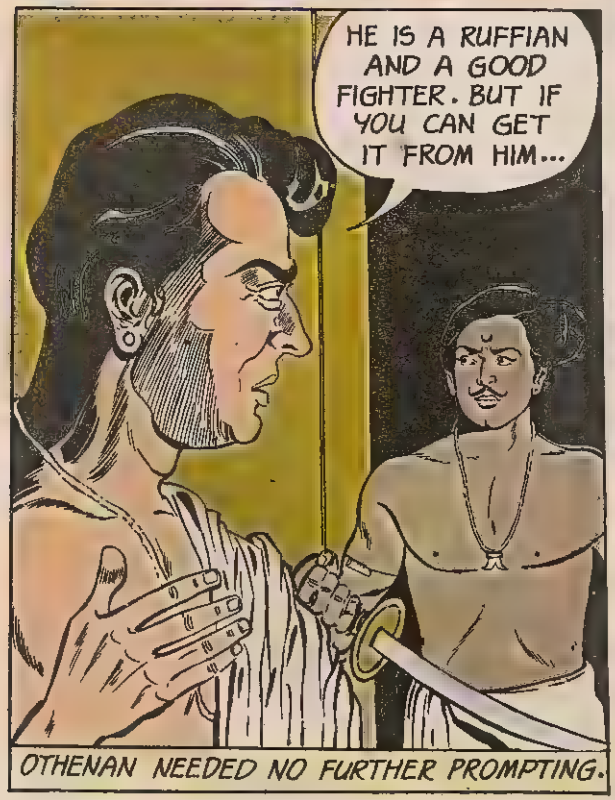

KELU WAS NO MATCH FOR OTHENAN.
I WILL NOT KILL YOU. I HAVE OTHER PLANS FOR YOU.


KELU'S MEN SURRENDERED. OTHENAN CALLED THE GUARD WHO HAD INFORMED ON HIM.
NOW YOU HANG HIM.

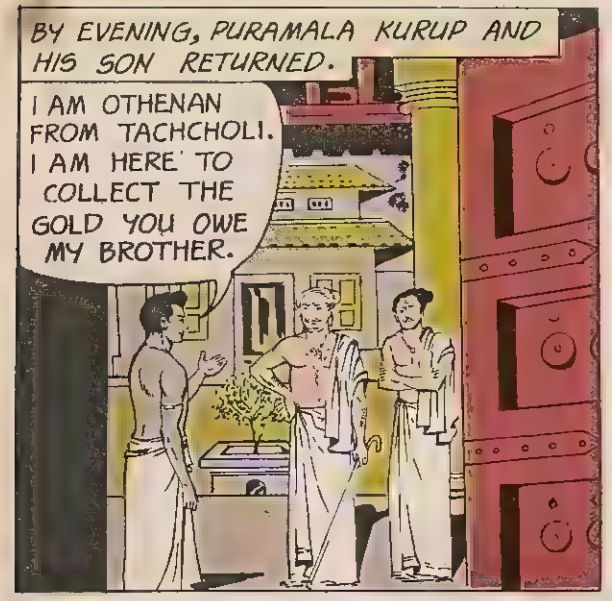

OTHENAN WAS ONLY TWENTY-TWO YEARS OLD. IN THE NEXT EVENTFUL DECADE OTHENAN FOUGHT AND VANQUISHED MANY TYRANTS OF THE TIMES. HIS FAME SPREAD AND HE BECAME A MUCH-SOUGHT-AFTER SUITOR.



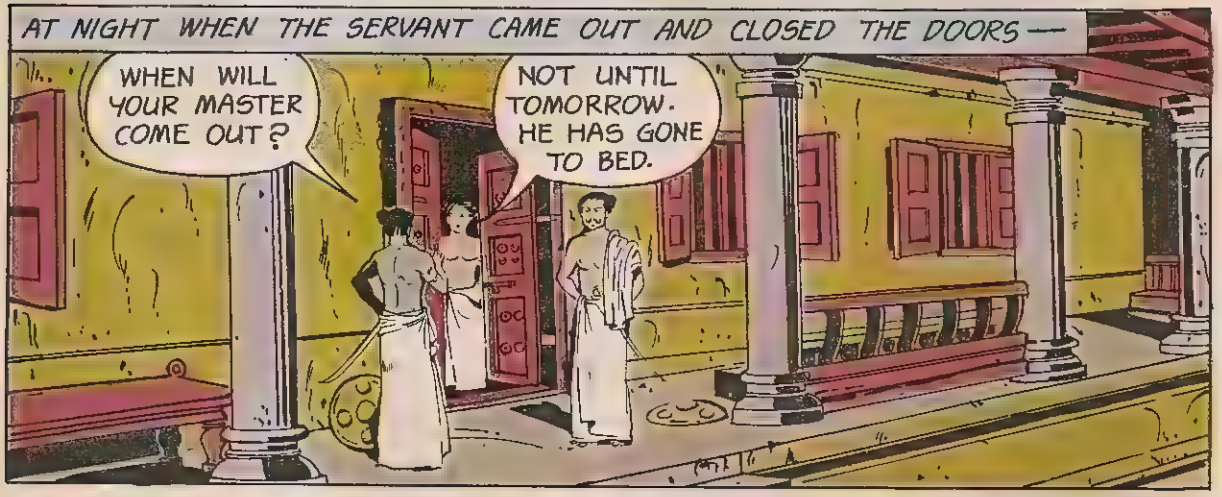


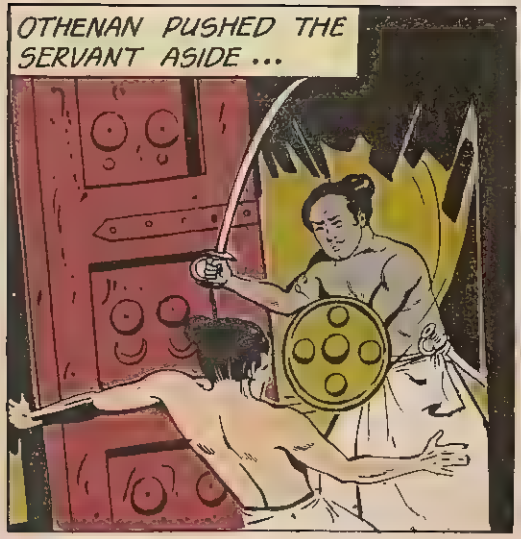


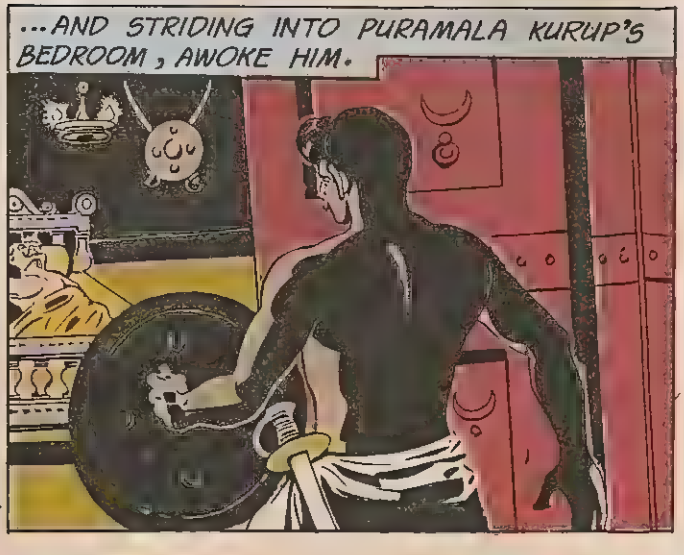
* A POOLING OF FUNDS BY INDIVIDUALS WITH PERIODIC DRAWS; SIMILAR TO A CHIT FUND.

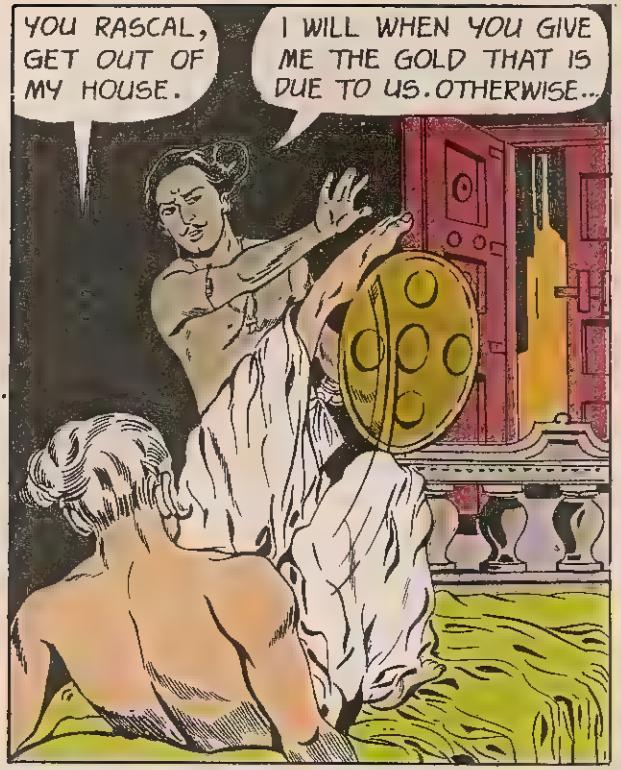

BY EVENING, PURAMALA KURUP AND HIS SON RETURNED.
I AM OTHENAN FROM TACHCHOLI. I AM HERE TO COLLECT THE GOLD YOU OWE MY BROTHER.

WITHOUT SO MUCH AS LOOKING AT HIM THE FATHER AND SON WALKED INDOORS.
FATHER, WE HAD BETTER PAY UP. OTHENAN IS DANGEROUS.
HIS MIGHT HAS BEEN EXAGGERATED AND THE KURI IS AN OLD STORY.

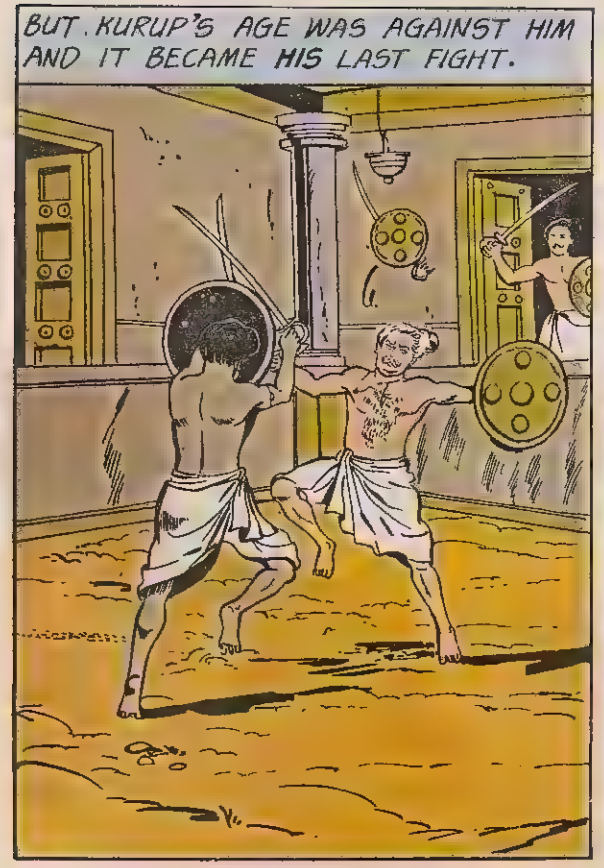

AT NIGHT WHEN THE SERVANT CAME OUT AND CLOSED THE DOORS —
WHEN WILL YOUR MASTER COME OUT?
NOT UNTIL TOMORROW. HE HAS GONE TO BED.


OTHENAN PUSHED THE SERVANT ASIDE ...


...AND STRIDING INTO PURAMALA KURUP'S BEDROOM, AWOKE HIM.


YOU RASCAL, GET OUT OF MY HOUSE.
I WILL WHEN YOU GIVE ME THE GOLD THAT IS DUE TO US. OTHERWISE...

IF YOU ARE ITCHING FOR A FIGHT, I'M WILLING. BUT I WARN YOU, IT WILL BE YOUR LAST FIGHT.


BUT KURUP'S AGE WAS AGAINST HIM AND IT BECAME HIS LAST FIGHT.

THEN THE IRATE SON JUMPED INTO THE FRAY. OTHENAN TRIED TO STOP HIM.
YOU HAVE YEARS OF LIFE AHEAD OF YOU. DON'T THROW THEM AWAY.
BUT THE SON WAS RASH AND RAISED HIS SWORD.

WHAT SHALL WE DO WITH THE GIRL?

WE CAN'T LEAVE HER BEHIND IN THIS MESS. WE WILL HAVE TO TAKE HER WITH US.

MY PRAYERS HAVE BEEN ANSWERED.

BACK AT HOME, UNAWARE OF HER FEELINGS, OTHENAN LEFT HER ALONE. AFTER MANY IDLE DAYS AT TACHCHOLI —

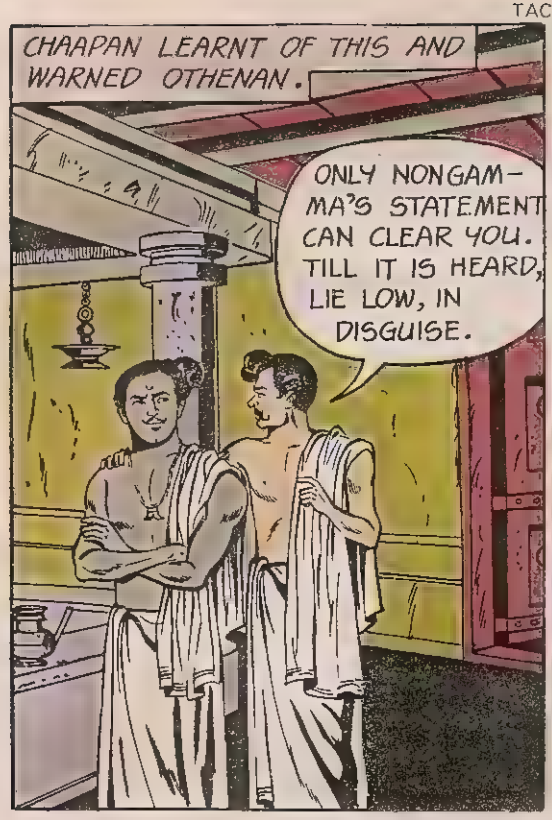
I AM TREATED LIKE A QUEEN. BUT I CANNOT BE A BURDEN ON THESE PEOPLE ANY LONGER.

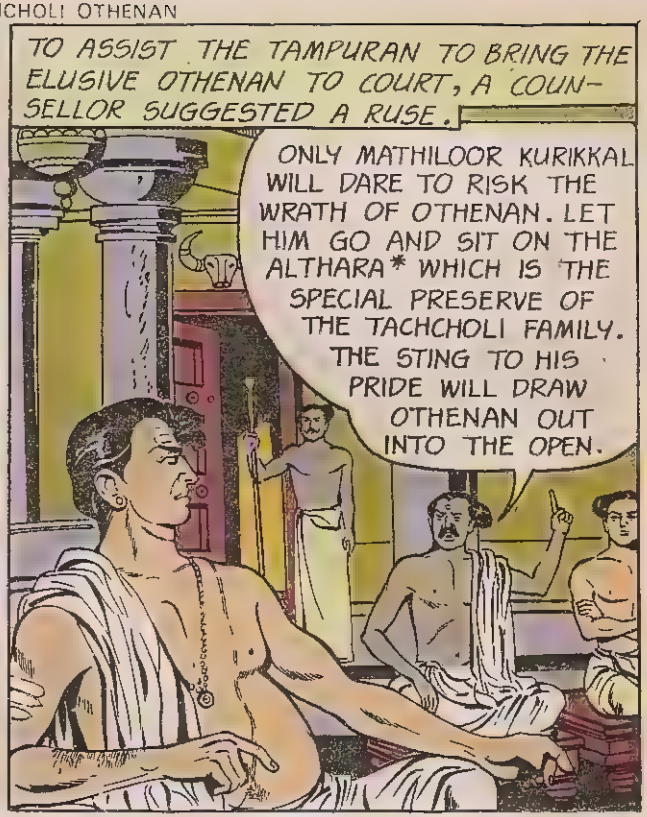
TO MAKE HERSELF USEFUL SHE BEGAN CUTTING GRASS FOR THE CATTLE. ONE DAY —

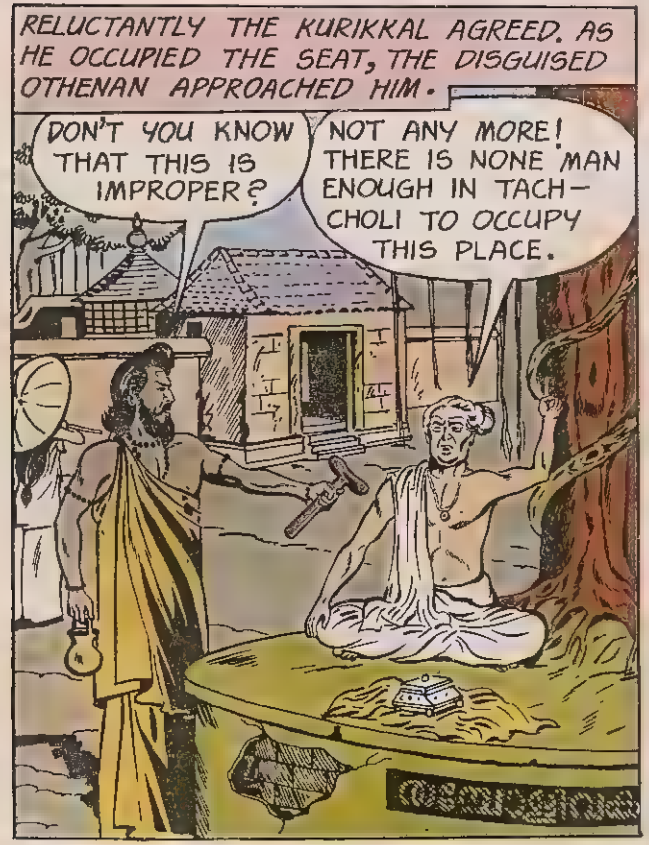
IS THIS THE WAY TO TREAT A FINE LADY AFTER KILLING HER KITH AND KIN? THE BOOR OTHENAN HAS NO RESPECT FOR THE LAW OF THE LAND.

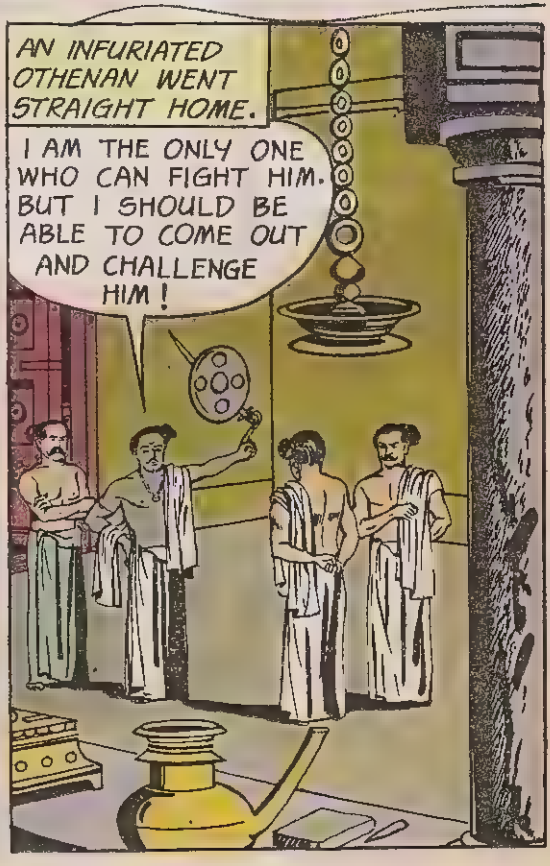
OTHENAN'S ENEMIES TOOK EXAGGERATED VERSIONS OF NONGAMMA'S STORY TO THE YOUNG TAMPURAN. HE WAS FURIOUS.

ARREST OTHENAN AND BRING HIM TO ME. HE SHALL BE PUNISHED.

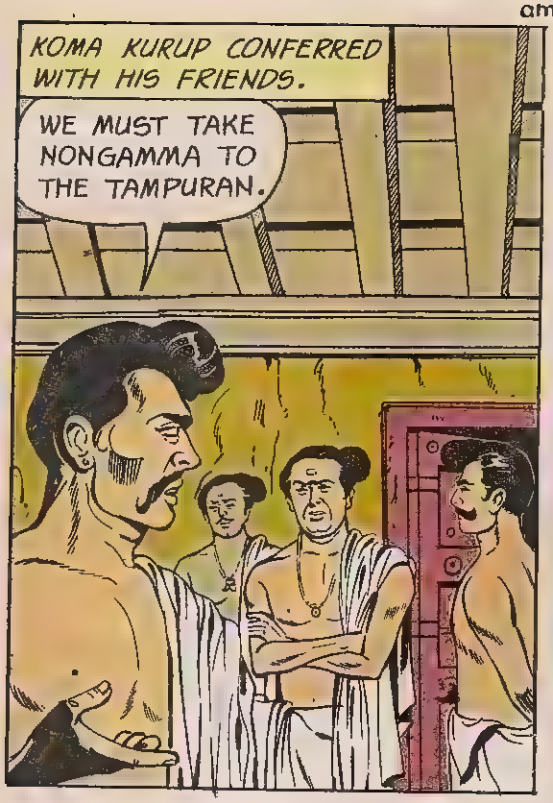


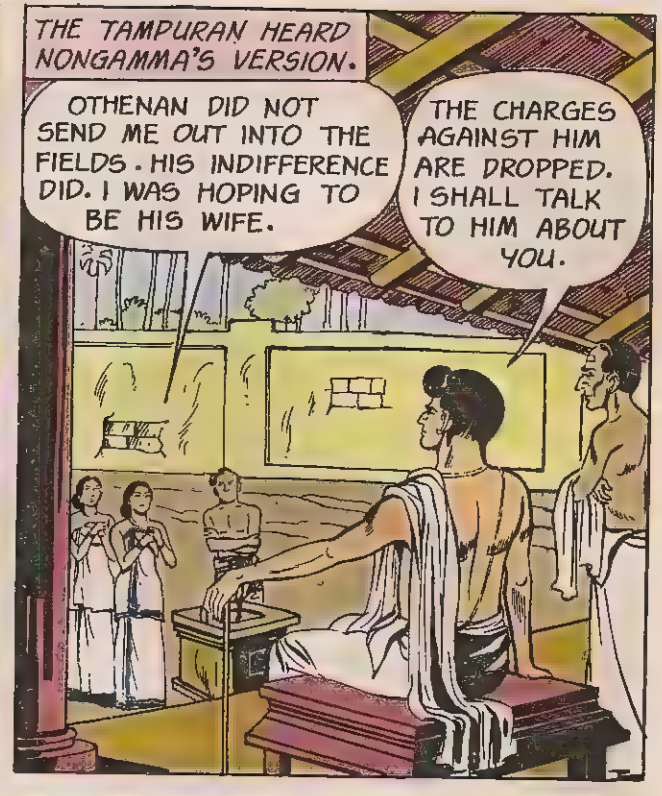


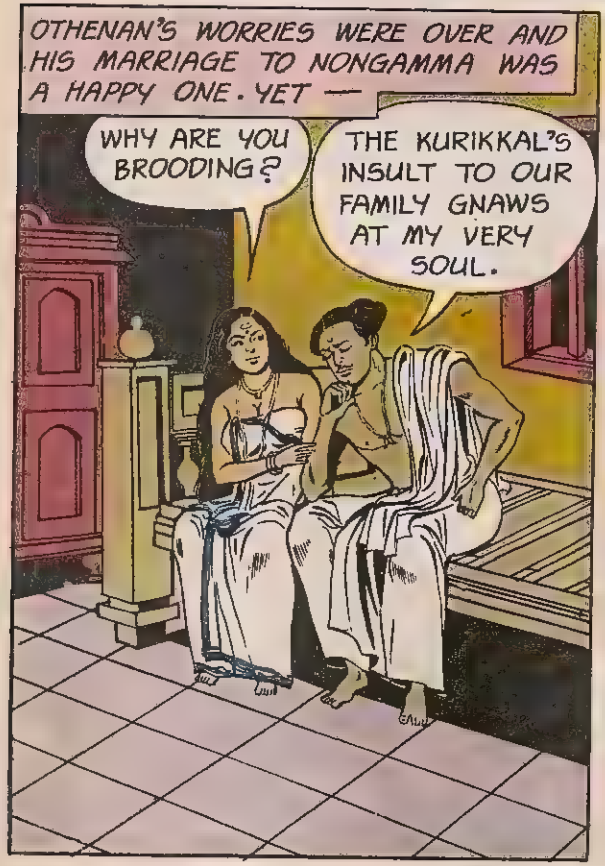


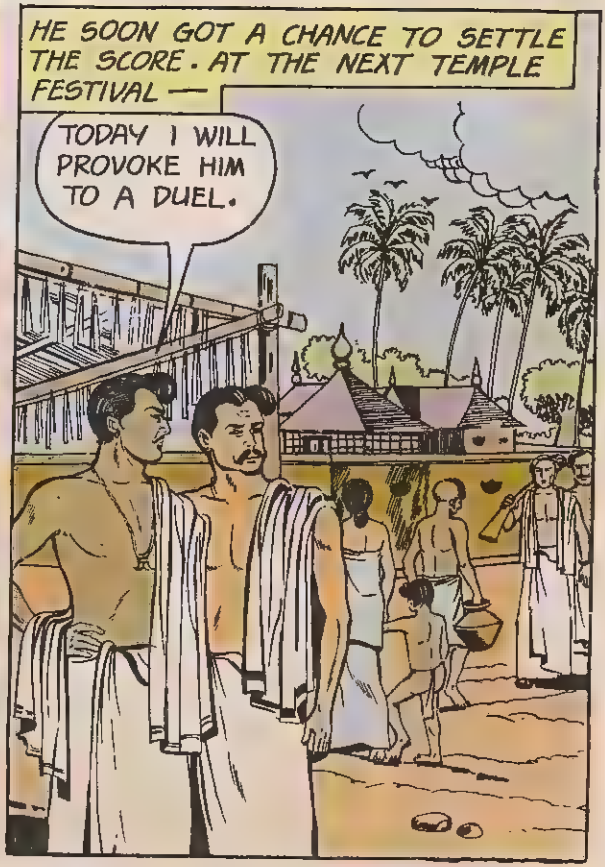


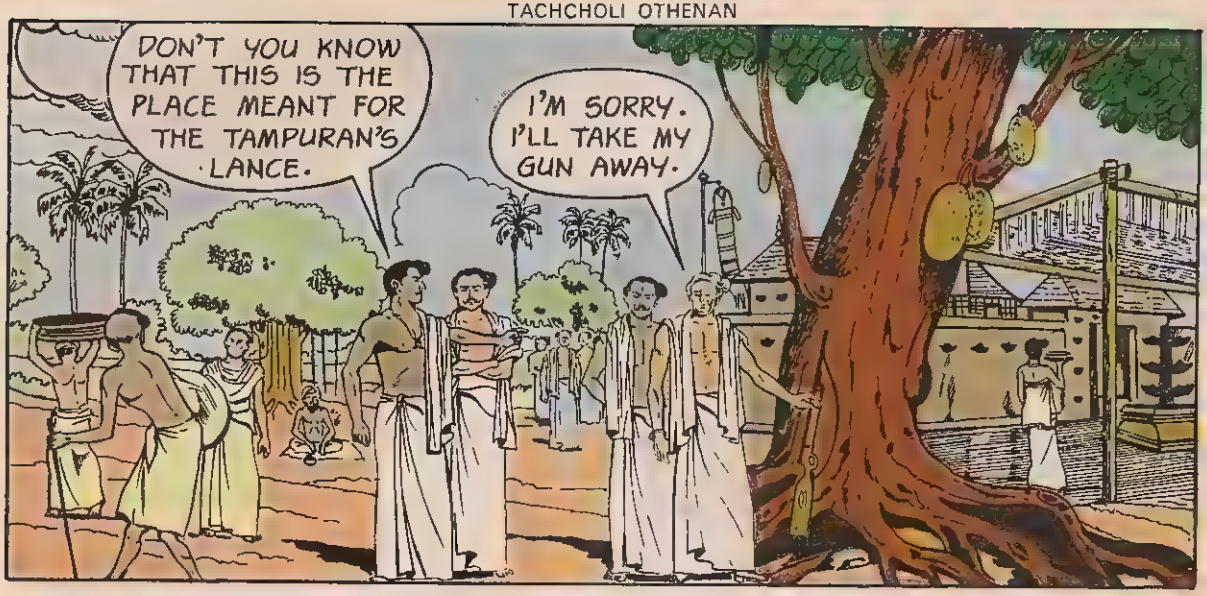
* A STONE PLATFORM SURROUNDING A TREE.


KOMA KURUP CONFERRED WITH HIS FRIENDS.
WE MUST TAKE NONGAMMA TO THE TAMPURAN.

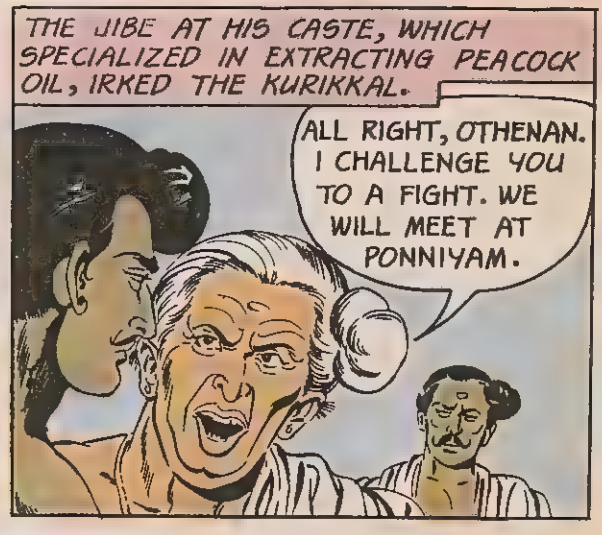

THE TAMPURAN HEARD NONGAMMA'S VERSION.
OTHENAN DID NOT SEND ME OUT INTO THE FIELDS. HIS INDIFFERENCE DID. I WAS HOPING TO BE HIS WIFE.
THE CHARGES AGAINST HIM ARE DROPPED. I SHALL TALK TO HIM ABOUT YOU.


OTHENAN'S WORRIES WERE OVER AND HIS MARRIAGE TO NONGAMMA WAS A HAPPY ONE. YET —
WHY ARE YOU BROODING?
THE KURIKKAL'S INSULT TO OUR FAMILY GNAWS AT MY VERY SOUL.


HE SOON GOT A CHANCE TO SETTLE THE SCORE. AT THE NEXT TEMPLE FESTIVAL —
TODAY I WILL PROVOKE HIM TO A DUEL.


DON'T YOU KNOW THAT THIS IS THE PLACE MEANT FOR THE TAMPURAN'S LANCE.
I'M SORRY. I'LL TAKE MY GUN AWAY.

OTHENAN WAS BENT ON MAKING TROUBLE. HE PICKED THE GUN AND EXAMINED IT.
A FINE THING INDEED! GOOD FOR ONE OF THE LOW CASTE TO SHOOT PEACOCKS WITH.


THE JIBE AT HIS CASTE, WHICH SPECIALIZED IN EXTRACTING PEACOCK OIL, IRKED THE KURIKKAL.
ALL RIGHT, OTHENAN. I CHALLENGE YOU TO A FIGHT. WE WILL MEET AT PONNIYAM.

KOMA KURUP WAS SAD AT THE TURN OF EVENTS.
YOU SHOULD NOT HAVE DONE THIS.
I DID NOT CHALLENGE HIM. HE CHALLENGED ME.

ON THE APPOINTED DAY, OTHENAN'S FRIENDS AND WELL-WISHERS ASSEMBLED AT HIS HOUSE.

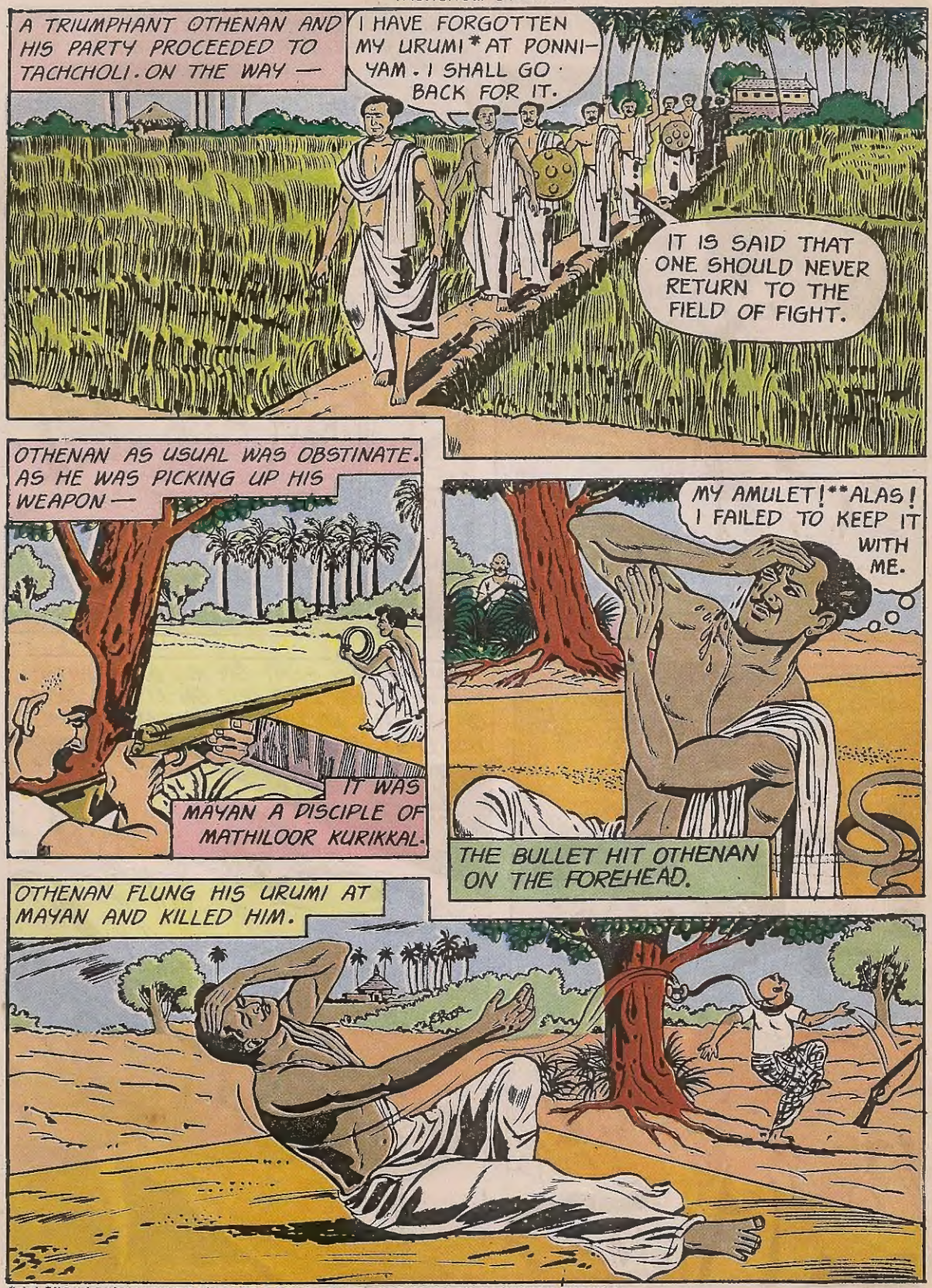
I GO TO FIGHT MY GURU TODAY. I SEEK THE CEREMONIAL APPROVAL OF THIS ASSEMBLY.

ATTIRED FOR THE FIGHT, HE STEPPED OUT AND STOPPED AT THE TEMPLE.

O BHAGAWATI, I SEEK YOUR GRACE AND BLESSINGS IN THE ACTION I HAVE CHOSEN.

HE REACHED THE FIELD OF PONNIYAM. THERE BEGAN THE DUEL THAT LASTED THREE LONG DAYS.

LIKE ONE POSSESSED, OTHENAN FOUGHT AND KILLED NOT ONLY THE KURIKKAL BUT ALSO A FEW OF HIS STARTLED MEN.



* A LONG FLEXIBLE SWORD WORN AS A BELT. ** THE ONE GIVEN BY RAMAPPAN KURIKKAL.

MEANWHILE THE GUNSHOT BROUGHT CHANDU RUNNING TO THE SCENE.

I'LL GET A STRETCHER TO TAKE YOU HOME.

THAT WOULD BE A FINE TRIUMPHANT ENTRY FOR A FAMOUS WARRIOR! NO. THANK YOU, CHANDU. I'LL WALK.

SUSTAINED BY A BANDAGED HEAD, OTHENAN STOPPED AT THE TEMPLE ON HIS WAY HOME.

LET 101 SHOTS ANNOUNCE MY ARRIVAL.

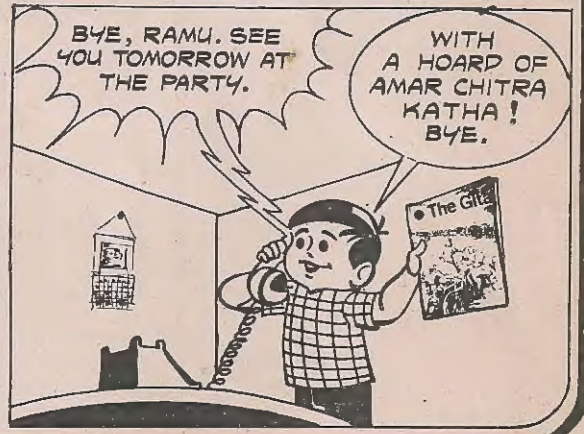
AT HOME HE GAVE HIS LAST INSTRUCTIONS TO KOMA KURUP.

NOW I AM READY TO DIE. YOU MAY REMOVE THE BANDAGE.

THEN RESTING FLAT ON HIS BACK WITH HIS WEAPONS LAID OUT ON EITHER SIDE OF HIM, THE VALIANT OTHENAN BREATHED HIS LAST.

Mohandas

THE BIRTHDAY PRESENT



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